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ABSTRACT

Loose coupling implies the tying together of subsystems in such a fashion that neither can do without the other but neither has much control over the other. The idea of loose coupling, introduced by Karl Weick, is examined in relation to educational administration and organizational analysis in general. The concept employs both a particular theory of social interaction and a distinct methodology. Loose coupling suggests that events or activities comprise subsystems and that these subsystems may only be lightly linked together, depending upon the welfare of the greater system. The concept, in relation to educational administration, is criticized, and alternative views on organizational theory are provided. Sixty references are included in the essay. Selected readings that relate to this concept are presented, and include (1) "Educational Organizations as Loosely Coupled Sytems" (K. E. Weick); (2) "The Concept of Organization" (E. Bittner); (3) "Institutional Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony" (J. W. Meyer and B. Rowan); and (4) "Organizations: a Dialectical View" (J. K. Benson). Each reading includes references and appropriate figures. An annotated bibliography is provided for further reading. (WTH)

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ESA 841 THEORY AND PRACTICE IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

Loose Coupling Revisited

A Critical View of Weick's Contribution to Educational Administration

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ESA841 Theory and practice in educational administration

Loose coupling revisited: a critical view of Weick's contribution to educational administration

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Series Introduction

It is now widely recognised, among theorists and practitioners alike, that the traditions that have informed educational administration as a field of study for several decades are of only limited use in coming to terms with the complexity and value-laden nature of educational practice. The sudden politicisation of the context and conduct of education has raised issues of immediate import that cannot be dealt with adequately by functionalist analysis or behavioural science. The collapse of these theoretical traditions in educational administration has produced a vacuum into which a very haphazard collection of intellectual bric-a-brac has been sucked. As a result, both theorists and the practitioners who look to them for help in an increasingly disordered world are alike in their bewilderment. How can alternative formulations be developed? How can reliable and relevant analyses be made?

The series of books of which this volume is a part is an attempt to explore a variety of intellectual traditions that have, until now, been largely ignored or dismissed by educational administrators. Each of the books is an attempt to bring a particular intellectual perspective to bear on the practical problems of administering education. They are, therefore, diverse in their starting points and in their analysis. What they have in common, however, is a rejection of a purely technical, functionalist approach to educational administration, and a commitment to a critical and reflexive consideration of educational practice.

The ideas presented in the introductory essays are necessarily an encapsulation of arguments which have developed and are developing more fully elsewhere. In order to assist readers to participate in these developments, selected readings are attached to each paper, and an annotated bibliography of key works is provided. We hope that the publication of this series will encourage others to join a necessary exploration of alternative perspectives in educational administration. Such exploration is long overdue.

Course team chairman

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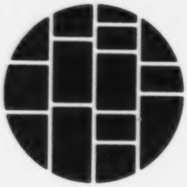

Introduction

Theory, so it is said, guides us in our investigation of phenomena in the world; but theory also tends to delimit and prescribe what will be seen. In organisational theory, our vision traditionally has been hampered, if not blinded, by later applications of the brilliant insights of Max Weber. Organisational theory has largely been the story of Weberian conceptions of the world. However, contemporary efforts to explain the reality of organisations challenge in a significant way the paradigms of thought that Weber's work sparked; indeed, the traditional approaches to the study of organisations — and schools are one aspect of this study — are in a state of confusion. Part of the confusion arises from the inability of the traditional approach to account for the complex realities of our organisational world. Thus alternative paradigms, in the Kuhnian tradition, have emerged as attempts to explain organisational performance. However, as we will show at a later point, the basic assumptions and strategies of some of these alternatives offer little more than a continuation of the traditional paradigm.

While there are a number of paradigms which interpret the problems and realities of organisations, the dominant one may be labelled 'functionalist' in that the various theoretical efforts undertaken share certain assumptions about the nature of man, the nature of society and the nature of science. The functionalist paradigm suggests, for example, that certain knowledge concerning man's place can be obtained through appropriate methodology; that there are patterned regularities and structures which govern human interaction; that these structures are capable of being observed and catalogued by disinterested parties; and that an objective rationality underlies the relations between men and their environment (Burrell and Morgan 1979, ch. 4). While there are a number of differing perspectives within the functionalist paradigm, by and large they share these assumptions and actively modify competing paradigms to fit these assumptions.

In terms of the nature of organisations in society, the functionalist paradigm is well represented by efforts ranging from Weberian and classical management approaches to human relations and group dynamics, to social systems theory, to work on technology, size and the environment, and to conceptions of the loose coupling aspects of organisations.

Underpinning these functionalist versions of organisational theory has been Weber's notion of bureaucracy as an 'ideal type' of organisational form. Weber identified several characteristics typical of emerging forms of bureaucratic organisation. These provided the foundation of an organisational theory which stressed hierarchy, rational-legal authority, and goal structures. Many of the questions that theorists subsequently asked were based on such ideas, and were concerned with issues such as the way authority is structured in a firm, the way organisations display rational behaviour and the strategies that lead to goal achievement or goal displacement. What is ignored, however, in these approaches is Weber's insistence on placing his theory of bureaucratic organisations in the context of the changing structures of society, particularly the increasing formal rationalisation of activity and consequent delegitimation of personal autonomy (Lenhardt 1980, p. 2). Formal rationality was, in Weber's view, closely tied to the emergence of capitalism as a dominant economic system.

Bureaucratic form in a capitalist environment served as an 'iron cage' trapping the employee in a cycle of dependence upon the organisation.

While Weber's work concerning bureaucracy was seminal for the later work of social systems theorists, the 'classical school' — Taylor, Fayol, Gulick and Urwick — had already developed similar theories of management in organisations. If anything, these stressed the reality of the Weberian concerns: Taylor's 'scientific management', for example, stressed the efficient use of resources (read 'workers') in achieving organisational ends. Time-and-motion studies of work flow and various law-like principles of management, such as those concerning delegation of authority, line-staff relationships and co-ordination of subsystems were the hallmarks of classical management theory. Objectivist and positivist, its tenets remain very much in vogue in contemporary managerial literature.

The human relations movement, based principally on the Hawthorne studies, is often treated as a counterpoint to the rigid mechanical orientations of Taylorism. In effect, however, this school substitutes the rationalism of the informal group for the rationalism of the manager (Carey 1967). The peer network becomes simply another variable thrown into the organisational equation directed towards the rational achievement of organisational goals.

Such an approach is evident in Chester Barnard's (1938) work, which was heavily influenced by the Hawthorne studies. Barnard, however, went further than the Hawthorne studies in his analysis of the organisation as a co-operative *system*. It is this concept of systems that has become, perhaps, the primary construct in modern organisational theory.

The notion of organisations as 'systems' is broad enough to accommodate both managerial and sociological definitions of the organisation. There are two analogies: organisations are *mechanical* systems; and organisations are *organic* systems. The former analogy allows us to interpret organisational performance in terms of managerial adjustments made to the system, so that inputs are subjected to some organisational processing leading to various outputs. Both the classical school and the human relations school may be thought of as conforming to the mechanical analogy.

In contrast to this mechanical analogy, the organic analogy looks at organisations as organisms which grow and mature, which have needs and drives, and which attempt to respond to the circumstances in which they find themselves. For example, Katz and Kahn's (1966) work takes as its determining motif an organic systems perspective, which has largely replaced the mechanical analogy. In an extension of the organic analogy, Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) base their 'contingency' approach to organisations on a model which treats organisations as systems which need to respond organically to the demands of the environment. The resultant activities are seen as contingent on such factors as the nature of the technology available, the product developed, and the strength and character of the 'turbulent environment'.

Many, if not most, contemporary efforts to discuss the nature of organisations adopt what they term a 'systems perspective'. While they are based on the organic analogy, such perspectives also stress the functional value of organisations (for example, schools are regarded as systems which maintain wider social structures through the socialisation process), and emphasise the rationality of organisational processes (for example, that organisations will pursue different means in order to achieve the goal of survival).

Thus we have in organisational theory generally a dominant paradigm which appears to present a coherent body of knowledge about the nature of organisations in society. While there are differing views and perspectives, it is assumed that most views can be accommodated within the paradigm, and that each view builds upon its predecessors so that we have an accumulating body of knowledge concerning organisational theory. The classical approach, for example, can still be maintained as one way of managing an organisation within the revised parameters of contingency theory. Likewise, a highly bureaucratic structure is an appropriate one for certain systems in certain environmental states. The human relations emphasis on participatory management can also be accommodated within this framework.

Given the development of such sophisticated theoretical stances, many of them backed by generations of empirical studies, it is somewhat surprising to find that organisational theory (and many of its children are in public and educational administration) is in a state of 'crisis'. This crisis has been provoked by critics such as Benson (1977b) who suggests that the rational, goal-seeking approach, essential to the functionalist paradigm, no longer serves any adequate conceptual purpose. The basic utility of this paradigm, encompassing mechanical-organic metaphors as it does, has been severely questioned: it is argued that the frames of reference it employs exclude any considerations beyond the analyses of the necessary conditions for the functioning of organisations, and even these are questioned concerning their appropriateness to organised activity. The crisis in theorising thus involves, first, the inability of the theories to explain persistent activities in the organisation (such as conflict) and, second, their inability to bracket organisational theorising and place it in the context of the larger socio-economic and political questions that both Weber and Marx emphasised. Thus critical and dialectical views of the nature of organisations are either neglected or subsumed under far less searching orientations. Moreover, as Burrell and Morgan (1979, p. 108) note, the functional paradigm tends to suck in opposing viewpoints and modify them to its own specifications.

However, while the rational, goal-seeking approach to organisations has come under increasing attack, it remains to be seen whether organisational theory can rescue itself by sloughing the bureaucratic image and adopting a more interactionist perspective which attempts to recognise ambiguities, to deal with fluidity, and to show how members go about constructing realities. This indeed is the newer development in organisational theory: an attempt to recognise the realities of organisational life by acknowledging the weakness of the rationalist model and by attempting to present a continuum of organisational style which ranges from highly bureaucratic to anarchic. This, in turn, is expected to account for the diversity in organisations and, particularly, for the fact that many organisations (schools, for instance) do not clearly exhibit the type of structure expected by normal systems theory. Although a number of scholars with different perspectives and interests work with these ideas, they can generally be addressed under the title of 'loose coupling' because that concept seems to pervade their work.

Loose coupling

The original idea

In a now-famous paper, Karl Weick (1976) introduced the idea of loose coupling in educational systems to organisation theorists. More specifically, he analysed loosely coupled systems, and chose educational organisations as the prime example, attempting to distinguish them from other types of organisations. While most of the work in this area has focused on schools, the concept itself has been broadened to cover all organisations in the sense that they are tightly (i.e. bureaucratically) or loosely (i.e. anarchically) coupled.

Weick (1976, p. 1) introduces the concept of loose coupling with the imagery of a soccer match where players can throw balls into goals on a sloped, round field whenever they want to, and can cry 'that's my goal' whenever they want. The idea here is that schooling is much like such an unconventional soccer match where the rules of organisation are suspended and the individual units in the game are only slightly aware of what the other units are up to. In Weick's words:

> By loose coupling, the author intends to convey the image that coupled events are responsive, *but* that each event also preserves its own identity and some evidence of its physical or logical separateness. Thus, in the case of an educational organization, it may be the case that the counselor's office is loosely coupled to the principal's office. The image is that the principal and the counselor are somehow attached, but that each retains some identity and separateness and that their attachment may be circumscribed, infrequent, weak in its mutual affects, unimportant, and/or slow to respond. Each of those connotations would be conveyed if the qualifier loosely were attached to the word coupled. Loose coupling also carries connotations of impermanence, dissolvability, and tacitness all of which are potentially crucial properties of the 'glue' that holds organizations together (Weick 1976, p. 3).

Thus loose coupling implies the tying together of subsystems in such a fashion that neither can do without the other but neither has much control over the other. The phrase itself is taken from a paper by Glassman (1973) via March and Olsen (1975). Weick also attributes the origination of the idea to Ashby's (1956) work on cybernetics.

The systems dimension to loose coupling is quite important, because overall it is the systems that are active, and coupled or decoupled, rather than the people in them. The systems framework imposes a need to find order and regularity in the events of the world, and in this sense it requires a purposive rationality. The coupling of systems must display a certain functionalism at the level of systems, but not necessarily at the level of participants. This indeed is what Weick sees as the purpose of coupling. Weick (1976, p. 4) argues that coupling functions generally to: protect parts of the organisation; sensitise parts of the organisation to changes in the environment; allow for rapid adaptation to the demands of the environment; increase the autonomy of the actors in the subsystem (a variation of the professional versus the bureaucrat argument); and allow for the conservation of those resources that would otherwise be used up in coordination. At the systems level, loose coupling can be quite functional in having the system meet *its* goal of adaptation and survival (although Weick acknowledges the possible dysfunctional side of each of these functions). Looking at schools, the loose coupling aspect allows, for example, the teacher–student subsystem to react to external demands (e.g. parental concerns) more quickly than if a rigid hierarchy prevailed. This in turn satisfies the 'environment', allows the teachers to feel a measure of professional control, and doesn't tie up the central office in minor agendas.

How, then, can loose coupling be observed in organisations? Weick turns to the methodological problem of seeing not simply 'loose coupling' but more accurately the absence of tight coupling; the problem he finds is 'that if some outcome is observed for the organization, then it will not be obvious whether the outcome is due to activity in the tightly coupled sector or to inactivity in the loosely coupled sector' (Weick 1976, p. 10). Thus the observer is required to remain sensitive not only to what is happening but also to what is not happening. Because a loosely coupled environment is rather unpredictable and ambiguous, the participants are required to make a certain degree of sense out of what is happening and the researcher is required to observe how this sense making occurs, again through what is not done as well as what is done. The scientist himself remains an observer whose duty it is to unravel the question, 'how does it happen that someone can take a series of loosely coupled events, assemble them into an organization of loosely coupled systems, and the events remain both loosely coupled but the organization itself survives?' (Weick 1976, p. 14)

In summary, the loose coupling approach to organisational analysis employs both a particular theory of social interaction and a distinct methodology. The concept suggests that events or activities comprise subsystems, and that these subsystems may only be lightly linked together, depending upon, in a sense, the welfare of the greater system. The theory of interaction suggests that the participants in the loosely coupled world must make sense of that world through the 'construction of reality', achieved through shared myth making and consensual definitions. Finally, the methodology suggests that scientists must refine their observational capacities and begin to collect data on the partcipants in their worlds which reflect the contextual dimensions of an arena where all is not as it seems.

Extending the argument

In a later paper, Weick (1980) examined the conditions which seem to facilitate loose coupling. He identified four: one, constant variables; two, neutralised feedback; three, prior socialisation; and four, cryptic surveillance. The first condition, constant variables, refers to connection points between subsystems which do not vary and, by not varying, tend to disconnect the subsystems. Thus the educational administrator tends to absorb 'noise' from the subsystem and does not pass it along to the other subsystems; he or she is, in effect, a constant who has disconnected the systems until the threshold for action is reached. These constant variables thus serve to decouple the subsystems.

Neutralised feedback leads to decoupling in the sense that the consequences of actions are not fed back into the system as guides for future action. As this feedback is neutralised, the coupling between events and consequences becomes looser and the organisation benefits in the sense that it does not have a reservoir of stored but outdated responses to new situations.

Prior socialisation, where the individual in the organisation knows many of the rules and expectations, can lead to loose coupling in the sense that specific directives for action are not needed. The novice teacher, for example, knows where to go and what to do (even if poorly) and doesn't need the constant or direct supervision of the principal. There is, developed among the participants, a knowing anticipation of roles and moves and a consequent independence of hierarchy.

Finally, cryptic surveillance can lead to loose coupling. This occurs when the inspection of members' activities, of funds spent, or of programs implemented, is weak and undemanding. Concerned more with procedure than substance, cryptic surveillance allows for the continuation of events as before.

These four conditions for loose coupling may be seen in school systems as well as in other organisations: lack of feedback about performance or activities, a variable connection point to other parts of the system, a weak socialisation process for newcomers, and the often inadequate inspection of events are all part of the daily routine in schools and, indeed, any organisation. However, it might be noted at this point that while these are seen as conditions which produce loose coupling within the system, they might also be considered as the results of loose coupling.

In his later work, Weick has taken his general concept of loose coupling which seemed to originate at the inter-institutional level, expanded it to cover not only macro systems, but also relationships between subsystems, and, more recently, relationships between participants as well. At this level of generality, the argument begins to lose some force as an explanation of organisations.

Loose coupling and schools

While Weick has presented his argument in largely theoretical terms, John Meyer and his colleagues have used the concept as part of their empirical investigations of school structures. A brief overview of their approach will be useful in further developing the concept.

The major thrust of their argument is that educational organisations must be distinguished from other organisations because they are institutions. As institutions, schools confer legitimacy on their products and serve an allocative function which not only distributes individuals to positions in society, but also serves to change social structure through this distribution process. Thus a high school graduate is certified as a legitimate candidate for certain positions by virtue of the fact of his graduation and despite the quality of his instruction. At the same time, educational systems can modify the social structure by distributing graduates differentially to positions in society (Meyer 1977, p. 64). According to Meyer, education

> functions in society as a legitimating *theory of knowledge* defining certain types of knowledge as extant and as authoritative. It also functions as a *theory of personnel*, defining categories of persons who are to be treated as possessing these bodies of knowledge and forms of authority (Meyer 1977, p. 66).

In addition, education adds to the theories of knowledge and personnel, and thus affects the subsequent social structure (Meyer 1977, p. 68).

Partly because of their allocative function, educational organisations are institutionalised and ritualised, and it is through these rituals that the institution remains legitimate. This is a core idea because it suggests that the 'work' of the school is separated from its certification aspects. Thus institutions, as opposed to technical organisations, depend on the acceptance of an elaborate mythology concerning their rational performance (Meyer and Rowan 1977, 1978) and not on evidence of competence in producing skilled graduates. Thus:

> Institutionalized organizations protect their formal structures from evaluation on the basis of technical performance: inspection, evaluation, and control of activities are minimized, and coordination, interdependence, and mutual adjustments among structural units are handled informally (Meyer and Rowan 1977, p. 357).

This requires decoupling or the presence of loosely coupled systems as well as what Meyer and Rowan (1977, 1978) call the 'logic of confidence' which refers to the assumptions that members share concerning each other's role in maintaining activities within the system. If the subsystems are in fact loosely coupled, then a certain assumption must be made that others are doing what needs to be done to retain legitimacy. Supporting myths arise to protect this logic of confidence from exposure, such as the myth of teacher professionalism, which serves to isolate the teacher from external inspection and evaluation (Meyer and Rowan 1978, p. 103).

In summary, the institutional framework has two major features:

> First, school organizational structures reflect environmentally created institutional rules concerning education. Second, these organizational structures are decoupled from the technical work of education and many of its vagaries and problems (Meyer, Scott and Deal 1980, p. 6).

The properties claimed in this institutional approach to schooling were tested by the collection of extensive data in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1973 and agian in 1975 (Meyer et al. 1978). The 1973 survey had as its focus four major questions:

1. Do principals and superintendents agree in their description of policies and practices?
2. Regardless of their agreement with the superintendent, do principals in the same district report similar policies and circumstances?
3. Do teachers and principals agree in their description of policies and practices?
4. Regardless of their agreement with the principal, do teachers in the same school report similar policies and circumstances? (Meyer, Scott, Cole and Intili 1978, p. 239)

Their findings in regard to these questions support the hypothesis of loose coupling, and, by implication, the theory of institutionalised rules. They found that agreement between principals and superintendents on policy was low; that agreement between principals in the same district regarding policy was very low; that the agreement between principals and teachers regarding policies and practices was limited; and finally, that agreement between teachers in a school on school policy was low (Meyer et al. 1978, p. 257–8). Their conclusion was, of course, that this lack of agreement indicates that the formal organisational structure — mythologised as a rational bureaucracy — serves mainly to legitimate the institution to outside forces, and that the technical or work aspects are in actuality decoupled from this structure. That things are happening in these loosely coupled systems depends on the logic of confidence existing in the school environment.

The findings in the second study essentially replicated the earlier one. Meyer, Scott and Deal summarise the later findings:

> Findings such as these call into question a conventional organizational interpretation, which would have participants in the organizational units — whether schools or districts — working out and reporting on a common normative structure somewhat distinctive to a particular unit. Indeed, these data suggest that participants share a common conception of general features of the educational system in which they participate that is little affected by the specific organizational context in which they are located (Meyer, Scott and Deal 1980, p. 10).

In summary, the loose coupling concept as presented by March and Olsen (1975) and developed by Weick (1976) has been found in the work of Meyer and his colleagues to be a useful heuristic for explaining organisational interaction with the environment. By using the concept of educational organisations as social institutions, by drawing on such anthropological terminology as rituals, ceremonies and myths to explain why there is a common belief in rational structures which don't exist in 'reality', and by adopting the framework of loose coupling, they have provided a broad overview of the structuring of schools in society. In turn, by analysing levels of agreement on key aspects of the school district, they have found some empirical support for their major theoretical arguments. It is the adequacy of that support that we turn to next.

Loose coupling: the soft critique

If we follow the work of Weick and of Meyer and his colleagues faithfully, the logic of the argument is that schools, by their nature, are loosely coupled systems. Schools, as institutions, must respond to the competing demands of those who provide its resources: parents, funding agencies, state governments, etc. To retain their legitimacy with such agencies and groups, they are required (in a manner of speaking) to isolate the technical or work-related dimensions of the organisation. Loosely coupled systems, Weick (1980, pp. 17–30) tells us, allow for the development of stability so that schools remain essentially the same despite the environmental pressures. Loosely coupled systems allow for the maintenance of multiple realities and minimal social ties: features, it would appear, of any school system which must both contend with the pluralistic demands of different constituencies, and conduct the work of teaching in isolated settings where the teacher is often divorced from adult contact for a major part of the day (see Lortie 1975). Finally, loosely coupled systems display a penchant for self-organisation, for forming autonomous smaller units which are self-supporting. This increases the stability of the system by reducing the number of interactions with the environment.

These characteristics might be seen as structural features in schools which allow the maintenance of patterns of interaction. The result is a situation where 'high proportions of administrative or organizational management activity are disconnected with the actual work activities of schools, but are closely connected with the political and institutional structures of the environment' (Meyer 1979, p. 6). The technology of the work environment is such that without a great deal more information regarding the teaching–learning process we would have to conclude that administrative activity would have to remain decoupled from instructional activity. The legitimacy of the institution would in fact depend not on what is being taught and learned but on the certification of who is doing the teaching.

The imagery is quite dramatic: individuals in subsystems creating and maintaining their own subcultures complete with myths and rationalisations, and only loosely linked to other cultures in the organisation. What can be made of efforts to try to increase the tightness of coupling within the educational organisation? A number of studies attempt to reconcile the political and economic demands of the system with the loose coupling approach by suggesting the need for, or possibility of, tighter coupling mechanisms. But, in so doing, the studies revert to a more rational-functional approach and thereby implicitly question the heuristic and substantive value of the loose coupling theory. Tight coupling, given the lack of knowledge concerning educational processes, 'can only lower the legitimacy and threaten the resources of the organization' (Meyer, Scott and Deal 1980, p. 20), yet it is exactly this which some researchers predict.

In a study of program evaluations in California, Wilkes, Eaton, Wood and Dornbusch (1979) suggest that 'in recent years there appears to be a general trend in federal and state educational policies toward tighter coupling through increased program specificity' (p. 4) and conclude that 'tight coupling may not already be here, but it is now, in the late 1970's, becoming a real possibility' (p. 23). Similarly, Talbert (1980) (having noted the condition of US education as reflecting declining fiscal support; declining public support; declining teacher morale; yet increasing centralisation of federal and state programs; and the decentralisation of the accountability movement) looks toward an exchange-theory perspective to supplement loose coupling. She finds:

> Almost by definition, loosely-coupled organizations do not rely upon administrators' management of work activities, whether supported by formal control structures or exchange-based power. However, where or when administrators become unusually dependent upon subordinate cooperation, we could expect exchange processes to be initiated (Talbert 1980, p. 31).

Here, as in her earlier work (Talbert 1979), Talbert is faced with the prospect of acknowledging the rather limited heuristic value of loose coupling theory and resorts to what in effect becomes a rather rationalistic account of how schools respond to environmental pressures. The loose coupling model, in this instance, tends largely to reflect interactionist perspectives as these are changed by new social demands, e.g. program innovations. The perspective is particularly concerned with the relationship between administrator and teacher in terms of maintaining or changing beliefs about the system but often relies on basic structural aspects common to bureaucracies (see Talbert 1979, pp. 123–64).

In these attempts to provide empirical verification of the loosely coupled metaphor there have been distinct problems with the operationalising of the concept as it was originally developed. In particular, the imagery of multiple social realities, of minimal social ties, and of self-organising systems is lost; in fact, loose coupling seems to become a metaphor for the level of bureaucratisation in the system. A highly bureaucratic school is tightly coupled; a less bureaucratic school is loosely coupled. In an attempt to account for the reality of interaction and development, researchers have had to seek hypotheses and possible explanations outside the loose coupling framework, or substitute loose coupling semantics for what is, under the surface, a fairly standard functional model of activity in organisations. Myths become metaphors for shared values, and organisations become reified as actors cleverly responding to the demands of the 'outside'.

But perhaps the most serious conventional challenge has come from the reanalysis of some of the original data supporting the loose coupling hypothesis. It has been shown how Meyer et al. (1978) and Meyer, Scott and Deal (1980) analysed teacher, principal and superintendent levels of agreement to find considerable support for loose coupling and the institutional view. Their data was taken from an extensive study by the Stanford Environment for Teaching Programs. As part of that study, Cohen, Deal, Meyer and Scott (1977) and Cohen and Miller (1979) looked at the relationship between morale of teachers and principals' supportiveness, control, supervision, etc. This work and complementary work by others could be taken as evidence of loose coupling in schools. However, a secondary analysis of this data (Salomon, King and Yuan 1979) raises, at the least, some interesting questions regarding interpretations of data.

In the reanalysis of the 1975 data, these researchers included both teachers' and principals' reports, and reading achievement data. Like the original research, they contrasted schools which were more complex (determined by school size, interdependence, material variation and environmental complexity) with those that were less complex. These schools were split at the median so that there was an equal representation in each category.

Some of their findings are quite interesting. Firstly, the data seemed to indicate a rather major structural difference between high and low complex schools. Salomon et al. (1979) report that the less complex school 'resembles a more traditional organization in which policies, satisfaction with decision-making and rule enforcement are preferred governance strategies' while the more complex schools 'appear as more complex webs of informal exchanges involving support, discussion, personal involvement and influence of principals on the one hand, and teachers' compliance, morale and even student achievement, on the other' (pp. 66–7).

Salomon et al. (1979, p. 81) also found that consensus and 'dissensus' seemed to be equally distributed between the two types of schools, a finding they regarded as somewhat surprising considering their speculation that more complex schools should exhibit more disagreements as might be predicted from loose coupling. They find that 'the question should not be what type of school is more or is less tightly coupled on the average but rather *what roles* do consensus and dissensus play in each setting, and through *what mechanisms* does coupling operate in each' (Salomon et al. 1979, p. 82). Here, although they remain within the general parameters of coupling theory, the authors have made a major step in reconceptualising the events in school in terms of a more political model which recognises at least that schools are arenas where different interests are served. This of course places a completely different perspective on the school as an organisation.

Salomon et al. also appear to raise difficult methodological questions about the interpretation of the data collected in the Stanford studies. The validity of the constructs used, for example, is open to question given that different meanings might be attached to the questions asked. As Salomon et al. ask:

> Indeed when teachers are asked 'to what extent are there *explicit school-wide policies* in each of the following areas?', one can safely assume their responses to be valid, though subjective, accounts of perceived school policies. But are such perceptions of policies measures of impersonal *coordination*? And why not impersonal *control*? Similarly, why is principals' discussion with teachers considered 'supervision' while their provision of resources — 'support'? And, why is satisfaction with implementation of decisions considered 'decision-making satisfaction' while rule enforcement is regarded as 'supervision'? (Salomon et al. 1979, p. 68).

They go on to 'question the desirability of constructing *a priori* theoretical hypotheses using highly abstract (and hence often fuzzy) constructs' (1979, p. 68). This is indeed faint praise for the conceptual foundations of the major study which supports the construct of loose coupling in schools. Although we will return to this in a later section, in essence Salomon et al. have turned Weick's aphorism back on itself: believing is seeing, says Weick (1976, 1980), and that is why we see rational structures. Quite so, say Salomon et al., if we believe our data will show loose coupling, then indeed that is what we'll see.

Finally, in a reflection on the analysis, Salomon et al. (1979, p. 90) point to the role that perceptions play in influencing responses. Correlations between groups of schoolpeople concerning, for example, such a 'hard' measure as a child's socio-economic status can differ greatly; it would hardly be surprising then to assert that perceptions of what constitutes a 'policy' could also vary considerably. Yet, the validation of an entire way of seeing organisations depends on the acceptance of these *uni-dimensional* categories by individuals who are engaged, according to the theory, in constructing *multiple* realities. The disagreement between respondents may not, therefore, be so much an indication of loose coupling as it is a problem in research design. It is one thing to say that perceptions of respondents differ depending on the particular role they create for themselves and that therefore their perceptions regarding events are loosely coupled (i.e. different) and another to suggest that this is evidence of a loosely coupled system. When different interpretations of events are possible, and yet the research enters with the presumption of certain categories, then the data may only yield a false picture of organisational structure. As Salomon et al. (1979, p. 97) state, 'once people's ways of perceiving their organizational environments are admitted, linear hypotheses become questionable.'

The preceding arguments constitute a critical perspective of the loose coupling thesis and its associated approaches from within the framework of the thesis, which has accepted it as a viable, if not yet completely developed, option to the standard model of organisational theory. For those who hope to explain the nature of organisations according to systems models, loose coupling has been an enticing way of confronting the multiple dimensions of organisations; and its popularity as a construct has been extended from looking at purely educational organisations to other forms, including the more technically oriented business enterprise (see Ouchi 1978). But when the organisation must be explained in the context of its social, political and economic environment, it seems that other, more traditional measures are needed to supplement the theory: the skeleton is not large enough to carry the body of organisational analysis by itself. If it tries to, it comes to sound suspiciously like the old systems theory refrain. Further, there may be some methodological questions raised concerning whether what we believe is also what we see. Talbert (1980) has noted that the institutional theory tends to regard educational organisations as all exhibiting the same features in response to legitimation needs; to her credit, she recognises that educational organisations may in fact be differentiated according to such common and unmythological dimensions as complexity, size, and socio-economic status of students. Are all measures of difference collapsed when *a priori* assumptions are made concerning the distribution of responses into certain categories?

Loose coupling: the radical critique

In a sense Weick is right when, in stating his guiding epistemology as 'I'll see it when I believe it' (Weick 1976, p. 3), he suggests that our perceptions of reality may be guided by our beliefs as to what is out 'there'. This argument, however, is circular and leads us nowhere. If we believe in rational structures, will we not see them, he asks. But if we believe in loose coupling, will we not also see that? His argument can of course be applied to any particularly riveting construct which conditions our interpretation of events; it thereby loses any force it may have had as a critical examination of social relations. This concept is based on a largely acceptant and conservative view of the nature of knowledge: it does not allow for a critical evaluation of knowledge.

Langer (1972) talks about the development every so often of 'generative ideas', those unusual constructs which (somewhat like paradigms) reveal new problems and new avenues of research. But they never provide (or haven't yet) the ultimate truth. In the field that we are concerned with, Weber's concept of bureaucracy was such an idea; the concept of systems and contingencies was such an idea; and now perhaps the notion of loose coupling is such an idea. It opens up a different perspective on the nature of organisations, but in so doing it traps us into seeing organisations within the confines of what seems suspiciously like a metaphor.

No generative idea is beyond criticism, whether from within its paradigm or from outside it. The attraction of a paradigm is often largely that it constricts our need to deal with other uncomfortable realities; it provides a path we can wander along. Sometimes though, we can't see the crooks and turns that the path might gradually make unless we view it from another path. This is what we hope to do in this section. Our argument will have three general thrusts: one, that the loose coupling concept with its associated ideas is mainly systems theory with a new vocabulary and thus suffers the weaknesses of the functionalist paradigm; two, that it provides a distorted view of organised activity; and three, that it presents an ideology of conservative alienation.

Functionalism in disguise

There are two levels at which we can discuss the functionalism inherent in this 'new' theory which putatively rejects old functionalist ideas both in terms of its specific claims, and on a more generally theoretical level. First, we should take note that Miles (1980, p. 61) has observed that critics of loose coupling have noted the marked similarities of the concept to Bidwell's (1965) notion of 'structural looseness' and to the traditional managerial concern of 'functional autonomy'. Spence, Takei and Sim (1978) have also observed that loose coupling appears to be no more than administrative inattention 'to differences that don't make a difference, which are to be found in any regulatory system' (quoted in Miles 1970, p. 70).

The concept of loose coupling itself, it should be remembered, stresses, firstly, that individuals doing activities are only loosely connected to administration and, secondly, that individuals proceed according to a 'logic of confidence' (Meyer) or 'presumption of logic' (Weick). Do these two aspects of coupling tell us much more than functionalist theory has already claimed? Loose coupling between systems seems, as a construct, quite close not only to Bidwell's formulations but also to the much earlier managerial work of Taylor. It is equivalent in a sense to Taylor's 'exception principle'. Taylor writes:

> What may be called the 'exception principle' in management is coming more and more into use, although, like many of the other elements of this art, it is used in isolated cases, and in most instances without recognizing it as a principle which should extend throughout the entire field. It is not an uncommon sight, though a sad one, to see the manager of a large business fairly swamped at his desk with an ocean of letters and reports, on each of which he thinks that he should put his initial or stamp. He feels that by having this mass of detail pass over his desk he is keeping in close touch with the entire business. The exception principle is directly the reverse of this. Under it the manager should receive only condensed, summarized, and *invariably* comparative reports, covering, however, all of the elements entering into the management, and even these summaries should all be carefully gone over by an assistant before they reach the manager, and have all of the exceptions to the past averages or to the standards pointed out, both the especially good and especially bad exceptions, thus giving him in a few minutes a full view of progress which is being made, or the reverse, and leaving him free to consider the broader lines of policy and to study the character and fitness of the important men under him (Taylor 1972, pp. 126–7, first published in 1911).

The last prase, 'consider the broader lines of policy and to study the character and fitness of the important men under him' is as apt an expression of the principal's role in the loosely coupled environment as might be found. The exception principle — that one is concerned mainly with the exceptions to the smooth flow of work — does indeed seem to say much of what loose coupling implies. In another passage, Taylor ties together loose coupling and the logic of confidence (although of course not in those terms). He says:

> The second function [after training the workers] of the over-foreman is to smooth out the difficulties which arise between the different types of bosses who in turn directly help the men. The speed boss, for instance, always follows after the gang boss on any particular job in taking charge of the workmen. In this way their respective duties come in contact edgeways, as it were, for a short time, and at the start there is sure to be more or less friction between the two. If two of these bosses meet with a difficulty which they cannot settle, they send for their respective over-foremen, who are usually able to straighten it out. In case the latter are unable to agree on the remedy, the case is referred by them to the assistant superintendent, whose duties, for a certain time at least, may consist largely in arbitrating such difficulties and *thus establishing the unwritten code of laws by which the shop is governed* (Taylor 1972, pp. 108–9, emphasis added).

Loose coupling and Taylorism share a functionalist bond in spirit if not in detail. Workers coming into contact 'edgeways, as it were', and the socialisation of workers through an unwritten code are concepts not far removed from the contemporary developments we have been reviewing.

This basically functionalist paradigm is characterised by a distinctive approach to the world. At first glance, it would seem that this approach, dependent as it is on such constructs as the social construction of realities, rationality as myth, and decoupled environments, goes beyond, as Weick (1974) hoped it would, current versions of systems theory to produce an entirely different way of viewing organisations. But essentially what has occurred is that a version of symbolic interactionism has been relocated within the context of systems terminology. The metaphor of systems is pervasive in these constructs and thus suggests that they must fall within the functionalist paradigm.

Some of the characteristics of this paradigm are: a view of society as prior to man, where man must be placed within the social context; that the researcher can stand outside the context and observe what he regards as important; that there is stability and regulation in human affairs; that science can be objective about such affairs and can verify theory through empirical data; that there is a purposive or functional rationality at work; and, finally, that there are rules and regulations controlling the world (Burrell and Morgan 1979, p. 107). The functionalist paradigm takes a rather positivist view of man and of science, and bases itself on the proposition of certain knowledge. While there are various perspectives within this paradigm, they all end up sharing to one degree or another these basic conceptions.

With the notion of loose coupling and the attendant institutional approach, we see first of all the begging of the question of what organisations *are*.

The assumption is that organisations, or even loosely coupled events, exist and that the 'actors' must fit into *that* context. It's true that in the world of loose coupling theory the context changes depending on our beliefs in a system. But what remains is a set of realities which we 'see' differently, depending on a type of 'need psychology' where we may need to be 'tightly' coupled and therefore interpret the reality in rational goal-seeking terms. But whether the participants see the loose coupling or not, and whether they tend to create myths and rituals to define their situation or not, there remains the prior context of a social system out of which individuals must make order.

While the individual members of the organisation struggle to define their contexts, it is quite clear that the research scientist, sensitised to the nuances of loose coupling, can stand outside the system and engage in more or less objective analysis of the components. The advice to researchers often involves the need to adopt a contextually-deep methodology for uncovering the coupling links and mechanisms in organisations, and there is little doubt that these can be uncovered by a scientist who is sensitive enough and searches long enough. The researcher, however, remains outside the object of his inquiry: thus, Weick (1976) points out that a major concern for a researcher will be finding out 'what kinds of information . . . loosely coupled systems provide members around which they can organize meanings' (p. 13) and then goes on to suggest that 'tightly coupled portions of a system should not exhibit nearly this preoccupation with linguistic work and the social construction of reality' (p. 13). The observation is that loose coupling requires a great deal of reality construction and tight coupling does not. The implication is that it is the observer or researcher who decides when reality-construction is being undertaken and then imputes either loose or tight coupling. The researcher, of course, being objective and data-oriented, does not engage in any reality construction of his own, but neutrally classifies that of others. How one determines when 'face work' and 'reality construction' are 'on' and when they are 'off' appears to be left to the researcher's discretion and to the researcher's determination of what activities are important — that is, tied to the coupling the researcher wishes to observe. This may lead to the verification of the theory in the researcher's eyes in that the empirical collection of interviews and observations (which is essentially done with an *a priori* intention of observing loose coupling) provides an *apparently* objective validation of the theory. Any contradictory observation made by participants may be explained away in that participants 'tend to over-rationalize their activities and to attribute greater meaning, predictability, and coupling among them than in fact they have' (Weick 1976, p. 9). It is left to the researcher to sort out their *real* intentions and activities.

Yet while the participants in the organisation may be dealing with ambiguous situations requiring much ritualisation and sense-making, at the systems level (that is, when talking about organisations) there seems to be, in this work that is being reviewed, a strong emphasis on rationality characteristic of the systems analogy in general. Essentially, the material on loose coupling is organised on two levels: one, the level of the actor in the organisation and two, the level of the system. In the former, the emphasis is on a symbolic interactionist perspective which, taking from Goffman's (1967) work, looks at the social frames which are created and maintained in undefined organisational situations. Here, concepts of saving face, establishing role and so forth prevail.

At the other level, however, the organisation comes to appear as a much more purposively rational instrument. The organisation is, in fact, reified as an actor and through this reification it appears to engage in fairly rational behaviour. Thus, Meyer and Rowan (1977), while attempting to show that formal structures which operate in a rational manner to achieve order are a myth in modern societies, nevertheless, see organisations as forming and expanding by incorporating institutional rules (p. 345). By doing so, organisations thus demonstrate that they are acting in a 'proper and adequate manner' (p. 349) by decoupling technical activities from elements of structure (p. 357) and maintaining elaborate displays of confidence (p. 358), all highly rational means towards achieving the end of institutional legitimation. The implication, therefore, is that it is the organisation that is acting rationally, not the people in it.

Whose rationality?

What a number of these ideas do is transplant the problem of rationality in the modern state from the level of individual action to the level of systemic action. This, however, contributes little to the analysis of the relationship between rationality and the crises in legitimation which seem to affect modern institutions (Habermas 1975, Weiler 1981). This problem bears investigation because the increasing rationalisation of institutions at an organisational level implies a decreasing opportunity for rational action on the personal level.

Weber (1968, p. 36) discusses several types of rationality, contrasting, for example, the emergence of purposive-rational action with value-rationality and traditional rationality. Purposive-rational action ('*Zweckrationalität*') refers to the person's ability to set an instrumental, means-oriented approach to activities as well as to choose among ends without regard to emotional or value-laden commitment to traditional or charismatically selected ends (Lenhardt 1980, p. 6). Bureaucratisation suggests the application of formal rationality on a systemic level. Rational-legal forms of action come to dominate in spheres previously controlled by charismatic or traditional rationality. Acceptance of formal rules of the means of governance are required in this type of situation regardless of the particular substantive content. The distinction that is being made might be between the systematisation of legal procedure in contrast to more particular adjudication according to expressed moral or ethical norms. Thus, as an ideal typification, formal rationality is of a later order than other types of rationality in that it abstracts form from circumstance and thereby universalises potential equalities. However, the introduction of a profit-seeking motive into social relations makes it clear that purposive rationality (seeing only means to ends) must consider individuals as 'resources', or means, to achieve industrial and corporate 'profits', or ends. This leads then to the alienation of workers, who are reduced to means, separated from the ends of the work which they would choose. Thus,

> according to Weber, the rationality of modern legal authority develops in such a way that for the members of a bureaucratic organization, and the citizens in general, rational action is reduced to passive con-

> formity. Under these conditions the rationality of the meaning which the individuals assign to their behaviour falls back to stages in the development of rationality far below the level designated by the concept of Zweckrationalität (Lenhardt 1980, p. 12).

Individuals in this instance return to a belief in charismatic authority (Lenhardt 1980, p.13) because they are no longer able to control their own ends. They substitute for these ends a belief in the legitimacy of a system of legal domination. In this analysis, the option of rational activity is foreclosed for individuals because they are caught in the 'web' of institutionalised bureaucracy. With the possible exceptions of the politician and the entrepreneur, purposively rational action is limited by the need to work within bureaucratic frameworks. Thus rationalism is, in this sense, displaced from the individual to the system.

Without drawing it through to its full economic and political implications, this is somewhat the message of loose coupling: that 'systems' act in purposively rational manners but that the possibility of that occurring in meaningful ways is foreclosed for the individual employee. Symbolic interaction thus becomes vested within a framework of purposive-rational action (Habermas 1971), with the result of possible disenchantment. This is true of bureaucrats and admistrators as well as of employees. About the circumstances of loose coupling, Meyer (1979, p. 17) writes, 'the ideal administrator, in this situation, will be a picture of ineptitude: ignorant of the most obvious aspects of the reality nominally under supervision, and tolerant of the most egregious mistakes'.

Thus, what was a critical perspective on the nature of organisations from the Weberian standpoint becomes an acceptant, if unknowing, depiction of the 'function' of organisations in society, reifying organisations as actors who behave without examining the deeper processes of social development which are occurring.

This takes us into the functionalism of educational organisation in particular. As we have seen, education as an institution serves to allocate individuals to positions within the social structure (Meyer 1977). This in turn is tied into loose coupling in such a way that the organisations under consideration must 'decouple' their technical core (inspection of which would only point out its deficiencies in producing some equality of achievement, and its low, teacher-dependent technology) in order to sustain its legitimacy as a social institution. Decoupling thus acts to further the legitimation of educational institutions, and 'powerful myths' develop to protect the ceremony of rational pedagogy and administration within the institutional confines. This schema, or framework, suggests to us that the institution has acted rather rationally in hiding its low technology, and that it should thus continue in its necessary and even vital functions of allocating position and awarding status. However, what happens if there is an apparent process of social delegitimation, as has been suggested in several works? (Habermas 1975; Weiler 1981; Foster 1980). Either the 'loose coupling' effects are somehow faulty in their operation, or the concept itself was never capable of explaining in necessary detail all the social, political and economic ramifications of institutions in the social order.

Among other factors, a legitimation problem can be said to be brought about because of a rationality deficit (Habermas 1975) where the symbolic promises of a technical bureaucracy go unfulfilled because of difficulties involved in steering the political and economic environment. Promises, in a sense, that are made by a bureaucratic administration go wanting because of the emerging contradictions between the promise and the fulfilment. Thus, in rather broad terms, there is implicit in the process of education in modern societies a hope of improvement, of class negotiation and of technical expertise. These are implicit in the political sphere of activity and serve in one way to legitimise the institutional framework. However, if such hopes are not only not realised but not *realisable* in the economic sphere (see Giddens 1975) because of the nature of a system requiring inequitable distribution of wealth and power, then the rationality of the system (in terms of instrumental rationality) is thrown into question. Questioning the rationality of the system may then result in problems of legitimacy for the system: it begins to lose whatever reason it had for doing its work.

This type of concern, however, is lightly glossed over in the formulations about decoupling and institutionalism. Meyer (1977 p. 67), for example, sees the legitimating effects of education as residing partly in its production of 'élites' and 'citizens' and makes scant reference to its role in the assignation of inequality. He assumes, as do other Parsonian functionalists, that 'nationally institutionalized mass education creates the assumptions of a national culture' (Meyer 1977, p. 69). What is neglected, however, is the role of educational institutions in creating inequalities which thereby threaten not only a 'national culture' by undermining the ideological foundations of such a culture, but also the legitimating premises of educational institutions themselves. In other words, we can ask, that given the dimensions of the equality of opportunity argument, how legitimate is it to continually violate the premises of the argument? These violations become highly politicised and publicised and thus contribute to the debate about the foundations of education. This calls into question not only the rationality of the institution but its methodology. The adoption by the individual of forms of charismatic belief in the functioning of the system as a rational endeavour is exposed as only that — a belief — leading to the re-evaluation of this institution and consequent legitimation deficits.

That this is not only possible but likely is highlighted by considering some different formulations regarding schooling which reject the institutional view put forth in the decoupling schemes. Spence et al. (1978), for example, suggest that it is 'custodial processing' which is the ultimate purpose of the school and it is for this that schools are essentially held accountable. Teaching then becomes an activity that occurs during the period that the school holds its charges, but is in no way the sole or major reason for schooling. It then follows that loose coupling of *instructional* activities is simply administrative inattention to what is not important; for the important, or custodial, events, tight (i.e. bureaucratic) coupling is very much in evidence. However, the justification (or, in current terminology, the myth) of schooling lies in its instructional organisation. The subversion of the justificatory activities leads to increased alienation on the part of the teachers and undoubtedly on the part of the students. Our argument would be that the increased alienation leads to motivational deficits concerning the purpose of participation in organised activity and then to rationality and legitimation deficits. This shifts focus away from the role of the school as an institution producing socially adequate élites and 'citizens', and onto the dilemmas facing an institution which functions in contradiction to its symbolic role.

Thus, on the one hand, schooling is taken to mean advancement in status based on the accumulation of technical expertise; on the other hand, however, 'schools buttress the system of social strata and contribute to making these strata impermeable' (Lenhardt 1980, p. 42). In addition:

> The social significance of equality of educational opportunity is very limited, even where it has been achieved to a high degree. For equality of opportunity in the educational system does not amount to anything more than equality of opportunity in competition for the unequal life-opportunities of the bureaucratic society. And if one can believe Weber's thesis that the rationalization process is reducing occupational skill requirements even further and is depriving all individuals of the chance to express themselves in their uniqueness in their work, then it is certain in any case that universal human equality will come to pass. This equality, however, will consist in the universalization of powerlessness in the face of the bureaucratized social apparatuses, and not in the abolition of power and domination, which would bring about the universalization of individual autonomy (Lenhardt 1980, pp. 42–3).

But these contradictions can be exposed and politicised, in which case a 'vicious cycle' begins, aimed at restoring institutional legitimacy. One then finds the emergence of 'hyperrationalization' of educational activities where policy developed outside the educational institution is designed to solve apparent problems within the institution, but which results in 'excessive prescription', 'procedural complexity', 'inappropriate solutions', 'first-order solutions' and 'wishful thinking' (Wise 1977, pp. 44–5). While Wise sees the inefficacy of hyper-rationalisation as a feature of loosely coupled systems, for us it serves as an effort to relegitimate the system, but an effort which fails not because of loose coupling but because contradictions in the cultural system of schools cannot be resolved by a technical agenda. No matter how many industrially-based accountability schemes are inserted into the educational complex, the resolution of the custodial and allocative problem is unassured. This leads to further alienation and delegitimation, and the consequent introduction of more programmatic attempts to restablise the institution. In simpler terms, if a school 'suppresses charisma, autonomy and spontaneity in its charges' (Lenhardt 1980, p. 47), no amount of technological manipulation will redress the cultural problem.

It is these questions which the institutional formulation of education as an allocative and change agency with a decoupled technology does not address. In the institutional formulation, the school is seen as a more or less stable environment with only its administrators oriented towards an extended political world. The internal effects of schooling in relation to social structures are ignored; and the relationship of the school hierarchy to the environment is seen largely in terms of efforts to maintain the stability and legitimacy of the institution in light of changing conditions. Viewing schooling from another perspective, however, alters this framework considerably. If schools are seen as custodial institutions or if the allocative function is seen as class-based, then we have altered the paradigmatic assumptions and have introduced a more dynamic model which makes legitimation problematic and which attempts to move away from a functionalist perspective to a critical perspective on the events in question. It is necessary to do this not only in terms of discussing the limits of loose coupling theory and its associated institutional ideas, but also because these concepts serve in many ways as an ideology which provides a limited 'way of seeing' the organisation.

Ideology and legitimacy

The ideological picture that is painted of schooling by systems theory tends to see teachers and pupils as passive recipients of reality: they engage in discourse separated from the machinations of the administration. Cryptic surveillance, neutralised feedback and prior socialisation all provide images of the teacher–student 'system' engaging in its own definition (or construction) of reality unhindered by concerns of conflict or change, of environmental demands or of abuses of power. The worlds they construct are internal worlds — oriented to the needs of the tasks within the system. The authority structure is lodged in administration. Teachers then emerge as a powerless group which has little or no control over the objective circumstances of its situation. But this image belies the fact of teacher organisation and unionisation, of student organisation and demands, and of parental organisation. The place of political movements and of social conflict is removed from this systems view. The symbolic interactions and perspective adopted in this framework yield some insights into the development of relations between individuals but do not go far enough in explaining the relations between individuals and their objective conditions, nor in understanding how the individuals could change those conditions. The politicisation of the situation can be developed through charismatic authority and can result in reflection on the conditions of an instrumental bureaucracy. The interactionist perspective refuses to allow for this.

In effect, the loose coupling terminology provides for ambiguous and unstructured worlds and thus demands that participants make 'sense' of those worlds. In so doing, it takes a general theory of social construction and places it within specific institutional confines where it is unable to accommodate historical, political and economic patterns which structure the participants' world as much as their mutual agreements. This in turn suggests that what is being put forward is an ideology which is both conservative and pessimistic. It is both of these in the sense that it denies the possibility of radical critique and change emerging from within the institution. Conservative also because this theory looks at the system as an ongoing and generally stable endeavour which develops rituals and ceremonies that protect it in its interactions with other systems. Terms such as 'increasing resources' or 'survival capability' emphasise the functional and socially conservative aspect of this school. This in turn becomes a message of pessimism because it removes from the participants the ability to control the functioning of the system. Perrow (1979) has noted that organisations are tools in the hands of those who control them, but this message is lost in the prevailing orientation to a reified systems view.

The dynamics of interests and conflict over interests are absent from the language embraced in these formulations, and are replaced by a functional systems perspective complemented by psychological relativism. Attempts to rescue the dynamic become absorbed by the ideological meanings of this world-view. Thus, the efforts of teachers to unionise and demand further rights in the organisation are seen as the teacher network becoming tightly coupled. But if a term means everything, perhaps it also means nothing. As Weick (1980) admits, the image of loose coupling is dependent on the level of analysis: 'Notice', he says, 'that what is a loosely coupled system for me, the group, may seem tightly coupled to the investigator who *starts* with that level of analysis (p. 7). The term ignores specifics of structure which occur at different levels in favour of a generally relative outlook which changes depending on the investigator. One wonders if the term simply functions as a metaphor for the degree of structuring observed in situations. The metaphoric dimensions would certainly attenuate the strength of the argument by glossing over an analysis of the critical aspects of structure at that level.

The loose coupling thesis and the associated institutional school can therefore be analysed and criticised not only in terms of their empirical validity but also in terms of their ontological, epistemological and axiological status. The ontology of the thesis suggests that social systems are ontologically prior to the individuals in them and that such systems act in selected ways designed to enhance their survival capability. Individuals in this world view must create their own meanings, but always in the context of the greater systems. Here questions concerning conflict and domination are considered irrelevant because the focus is largely on the relationship between systems and not on the impact of organisations on personal and interpersonal autonomy. Further, individuals are not seen as active creators of their worlds over which they can exert control but as sense-makers in a world given to them.

The epistemological thrust of the arguments concerns ways of gathering knowledge about organisations. We have seen here the positivist bias of these approaches as far as assumptions are made that increasing certainty can be had by gathering information through empirical data-collecting techniques, that this knowledge can be used to further predictions of consequences at the systemic level, and that the researcher/scientist stands outside the object of his or her investigation without unduly influencing it or necessarily having to understand the meaning participants give to it. Their actions and not their intentions are taken as the appropriate unit for analysis.

The axiology of these theories is essentially a continuation of a conservative, regulatory-oriented approach to organisations and the people in them. The value assumptions being made support the continuation of systems of legal domination and are insensitive to the claims of those who find themselves oppressed by such a system or of those who are reduced to acclamation of roles within such a system. By endorsing the very structure of the system they analyse, an implicit value is given to the productive relationships that occur in capitalist economies and the resultant inequities in the distribution of wealth (Bowles and Gintis 1976) and of cultural knowledge (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bates 1980, 1981).

In summary, then, loose coupling as a concept *does not exist simply* *as a descriptor of relationships between events*; if it were only this, it could be taken as one of a number of possible connectors. Rather, it is intimately tied to a systems-theory approach to social structure and to organisations within that structure. Consequently it is part of a paradigm which is functionalist, objectivist, conservative and pessimistic.

Some alternative views on organisational theory

We have seen how the loose coupling formulation and its attendant theses continue in the same paradigm as the mainstream or traditional approaches they supposedly replace. What is less clear are some alternative frames for considering organisations and for addressing the crisis in organisational theory. Loose coupling and the institutional school provide some tantalising and stimulating insights into the world of organisations: their formulation of the work environment and their description of educational organisations as institutions requiring legitimation are cleverly done and extend the insights of the functionalist paradigm. However, they are also conceptually inadequate for the task of analysing social relations. We will attempt to review here four of the alternative approaches to studying organisations in the hope that this will help in the larger task of understanding social sturctures. These are dialectical, ethnomethodological, cutural and critical approaches.

A dialectical approach

Benson (1977a) has taken the position that organisations might be fruitfully considered by taking a dialectical viewpoint. Dialectics for Benson

> offers an explanation of the processes involved in the production, the reproduction, and the destruction of particular organizational forms. It opens analysis to the processes through which actors carve out and stabilize a sphere of rationality and those through which such rationalized spheres dissolve (Benson 1977a, p. 2).

The dialectical approach that Benson advocates does not reject conventional organisational views out of hand; it does however attempt to place previous work within a critical context which examines the content of such work in reference to the processes through which social order is maintained and dissolved. Four principles guide this effort: social construction/production, totality, contradiction, and praxis.

The first of these pertains to those activities we have seen to be a prime component of loose coupling theory: the social construction of reality. However, it is noted that 'people produce a social world which stands over them, constraining their actions' (Benson 1977a, p. 3). This is an important difference because it points out, as loose coupling does not, that a social world, if indeed it is subjectively created, is created within the confines of an existing social structure which provides its own definitions and meanings. But it also allows for the critique of that structure so that people may transform it. A second dimension concerns the concept of totality: that one must be concerned with the whole rather than with isolated parts. Thus, one must see the organisation as a unit in context, the context of the larger social system. This allows one to focus on the relationships between structures as well as on the structure itself.

The concept of contradiction is likewise important to dialectical theory. Whereas the development of institutional structures in the context of a political economy will engender contradictions, it is the exposure of these contradictions which allows transformative change. In education, a major example is the contradiction that arises between the role of the school as a vehicle for technical advancement and its role as a status inhibitor in maintaining established status barriers.

Finally we should note the dimension of praxis found in Benson's work. Praxis, for Benson (1977a, p. 5), is the 'free and creative reconstruction of social arrangements on the basis of a reasoned analysis of both the limits and the potentials of present social forms'. Certain elements of praxis should be understood: it is free of domination, either cultural, linguistic or of any other sort; it is reasoned, but utilises a reason which is based on free and open discussion of substantive ends; and finally, it is aimed at the transformation of inadequate social structures in order to emancipate people from repressive activity.

These dimensions of dialectical theory change to a significant degree the questions we ask about organisations. This theory takes a step beyond the social-psychological determinism that plagues the loose coupling school and links organisations and administration to their wider context. It requires that we continually reformulate our view of organisations and it suggests which constructs an organisational theory should incorporate. Indeed, Benson, in another work suggests that an adequate organisational theory

> must deal with (1) social production of organizational reality . . . (2) the political bases of organizational reality . . . (3) the connection of organizations to the larger set of structural arrangements in the society; and (4) the continuously emergent character of organizational patterns (Benson 1977b, p. 16).

Benson's approach thus takes organisational theory away from both the traditional-rational and goals-oriented conception (which did not recognise Weber's contribution as a socially developmental one rather than a static one) and the loosely coupled, institutional school (which allows for differing realities but places these in a functionalist, systems perspective). The dialectical theory allows one to consider organisations in relation to the evolving nature of the neo-capitalist state and this is a major contribution. In this sense, it allows for a critical analysis of the relationship between institutions and modes of production in line with what has been done in other fields by scholars such as Spring (1972), Karier, Violas and Spring (1973), Apple (1979, 1982) and Giroux (1980). While Benson's approach to dialectical theory doesn't adequately focus on mechanisms of social domination or processes of cultural reproduction, it does indicate the potential for exploring these areas as part of organisational theory. The functionalist problem is, if not fully replaced, at least supplemented by a problem more concerned with processes of organisational formation.

Benson's approach might be adequately labelled as 'positive dialectics' in the sense that it is programmmatic in specifying where organisational theory should go and what it should consider. It provides the broad outlines of what an alternative theory might look like but by itself does not provide an extended reanalysis of organisational theory. This might be done through negative dialectics, where the reifications and ideological dimensions of organisational theory and of organisations are exposed.

Such an approach might take as its focus social problems — sexism, racism, employee domination, appropriation of labour — and critically examine these both in terms of their *reality* in organisations and their *unreality* in theory of organisations. In particular, such an approach would be concerned with the analysis of class interests in the development of organisations and with the substructural relations that obtain between organisations, organisational theory and support of capital in the state. Negative dialectics can confront the hegemony established by the confluence of dominant interests of the capitalist, institutional and academic élites and in so doing can outline systems of power and domination which serve to maintain the extant social structure (see Clegg and Dunkerley (1977) for examples of this approach).

Ethnomethodology

Another view of organisations which escapes the functionalist paradigm is that of an ethnomethodological approach to organisations. A good example of this is the short article by Bittner (1974). This work, however, takes us away from the dialectical approach into a more interpretive paradigm wherein the commonsense notions of the categories themselves are explored. In this fashion, Bittner's early work contains the seeds of such formulations as logic of confidence and organised anarchies. For example, Bittner sees the possibility of studying organisations as a 'model of stylistic unity'. This seems to mean that the discrete performances and activities in the organisation may be differentially treated but in their logical reconstruction they are seen as elements of a pattern which displays thematic unity. Bittner (1974, pp. 78-9) writes that 'the dominant consideration underlying this construction [of stylistic unity] would not be found in the field of means–ends relations but in an all-pervading sense of piety'. How these senses are established and communicated becomes the source of the methodologists' concern. Obviously, Bittner in this approach has moved away from the functional paradigm by questioning the adequacy of idealised theory to account for commonsense constructs in a meaningful way. Thus:

> If the theory of bureaucracy is a theory at all, it is a refined and purified version of the actors' theorizing. To the extent that it is a refinement and purification of it, it is, by the same token, a corrupt and incomplete version of it; for it is certainly not warranted to reduce the terms of common-sense discourse to a lexicon of culturally coded significances to satisfy the requirements of theoretical postulation (Bittner 1974, p. 74).

In this regard, theory abstracts from the commonsense constructs (which are prior to theory), and through the abstraction distorts their full meanings and relevance. Because of this distortion, our view of organisations *which is informed by theory* — is itself distorted. Seeing organisations as rational bureaucracies in this sense is a false picture of the organisation as it is practised; seeing the organisation as a loosely coupled system is a false picture of the organisation because that too is a theoretical abstraction which distorts the meanings and events in organisations. In addition, it applies to what are differentiated, historically located constructs in undifferentiated and ahistorical theory.

Studying organisations, if this is what we are about, must take into account not our *a priori* theoretical perceptions of organisation but the prior, commonsense constructs used in organisations. These in turn can be presented as rules and gambits which members use to interact in this environment. Ethnomethodology is, in Garfinkel's words (1974, p. 18) 'organizational study of a member's knowledge of his ordinary affairs, of his own organized enterprises, where that knowledge is treated by us as part of the same setting that it also makes orderable'. This departure from conventional studies of organisation serves to highlight the nature of the organisation as it is continually maintained by members' interpretations and concessions to shared rules. It does not, of course, bring into play the dialectical framework of placing organisations in relation to political and economic structures, although it does provide valuable insights into the existential status of life in organisations. In addition, by allowing the observer to get 'inside' the organisation (and to study in terms of members' meanings of the organisation and observers' influence on members' meanings), this framework refutes the positivist and objectivist methodology of structural-functionalism.

A cultural approach

In this approach, which is dialectical by nature, the concept of culture plays a significant role. That is, schools are seen not just as repositories of technical knowledge but as processors of cultural knowledge and of culture itself. Thus, how schools process cultural attributes, and to whom, becomes an important question. The loose coupling framework is challenged by this concept because it cannot account for processes of cultural transmission; in other words, it cannot account for the nexus between the wider society, the administration, the teaching network and the student population. It abstracts from these realities and, in so doing, misses the essence of the educational position in modern society. As Bates (1982, p. 9) suggests, 'educational organisations, above all, are committed to the maintenance, transmission and recreation of culture'. Taking this cultural perspective allows us to incorporate the value of myths, rituals and negotiations (Bates 1982, p. 11) without trivialising their content in respect to systems-theory views. We can realise then that

> administration is therefore as much a rhetorical activity as a technical one, directed towards the mediation of cultural reproduction through the coupling of the internal culture of the schools with specific external cultures (Bates 1981, p. 19).

However, at the same time that the rhetorical activity takes place, we must also recognise that 'education is increasingly recognised as a system of cultural transmission and reproduction which serves to simultaneously maintain, disguise and legitimate the interests of particular groups within the social system' (Bates 1980, p. 27).

This indicates that a cultural theory of educational administration which develops outside the functionalist paradigm is both appropriate and necessary to the analysis of the modes of transmission and reproduction of what counts as knowledge within the system.

A cultural theory of administration and of organisations would place culturally relevant studies in the context of social and historical regularities. Its aim would be praxis rather than prediction. Analyses of cultural reproduction in the school setting may be a major aim of such a theory. As an alternative, such a theory would reject the positivist assumptions found in traditional studies on administration, and would scrutinise closely those *a priori* concepts which are put forth as explanations of organisations but which continue the assumptions of the systems-theory view. New issues and new problems replace the now well-worn turf of functionalist theory, and orient the administrator more appropriately to dimensions of praxis in the educational organisation.

A critical approach

These three approaches share a fundamental orientation with the fourth alternative approach: that is, the critical aspect of a 'critical theory' of educational administration. This is vital to our reconceptualisation of the nature of educational organisations. While 'noncritical' theory seeks merely to predict future events from past ones, a critical theory, based on a dialectical view of organisations, seeks to understand and, in understanding, to reveal the conditions of domination and the possibilities of practical emancipation. In this respect it must be carefully distinguished from such systems-theory views as loose coupling which lack — more accurately, repress — value orientations wherein praxism is a major ideal.

As a way of thinking about social political and economic structures, critical theory (as formulated by the Frankfurt School)

> aspires to bring the subjects themselves to full self-consciousness of the contradictions implicit in their material existence, to penetrate the ideological mystifications and forms of false consciousness that distort the meaning of existing social conditions (Bernstein 1976, p. 182).

This sets the agenda for developing a critical theory of administration, one in which the forms of psychologism and neo-Taylorism (see Gronn 1982) which dominate the intellectual side of the field might be analysed. While the cultural origins of critical theory are beyond the scope of this essay, the current conceptualisations developed by critical theorists seem most appropriate to the field of administration (Giroux 1983).

Habermas (1971), the leading critical theorist today, identifies three cognitive 'interests' which serve for our purpose to allow us to begin an analysis of educational administration. By looking at three dimensions of human existence — the dimension of work (labour), the dimension of interaction (communication), and the dimension of power (control) — Habermas concludes that the three interests of technique, practice and emancipation govern human development. The technical interest, grounded in power, attempts to extend domination over nature (i.e. natural science) and possibly man (i.e. social science). The practical interest is reflected in the need to labour and to establish shared understandings which make the labour meaningful. The emancipatory interest flows out of the other two interests in the sense that it looks to the development of the ideal human situation wherein technical activity serves to extend practical interests.

In modern societies, however, the technical interest becomes a dominating force which begins to control both symbolic and work activities. The tradition of having a technical rationality serve the ends identified in symbolic discourse is reversed and, as in the case of the appropriation of human labour to serve as a means toward capital accumulation and expansion, what was once labour-valued becomes exchange-valued with a resultant alienation of man from work. Administration, in this formulation, serves as a means of technical control rather than as a means of institutional emancipation. Thus the technical interest, as represented, say, by social science, becomes a means for furthering the administrative domination of the institution or organisation over formerly autonomous individuals who can no longer control their own destinies. The idea of all persons engaging in rational discourse regarding the ends of the collectively organised institution is either dismissed as unrealistic with the accompanying recognition that unequal power distributions are somehow appropriate as they stand, or glossed over by the implementation of a pseudoparticipatory program which is itself constrained by underlying and unstated structural limitations.

In this way, much of what passes as organisational and administrative theory serves as an ideologically legitimating device for maintaining unequal distributions of power, of economy and of cultural knowledge. The emancipatory potential of the school remains only as the exception. In educational administration, for example, one is provided with a constructed social science that embraces a number of forms of psychologism and sociologism.

In respect to the psychological form, one finds that the dominant orientation in administration is one in which every attempt is made to 'fit' the individual into the institution. The concepts of 'role', maturation, leadership, climate, and communication stress in particular how (in the terminology of the Getzels-Guba model) the ideographic dimension can be accommodated to the nomothetic dimension. In simpler language, this means the development of technical apparatuses which demand the conformity of the individual to an institutional code of life which has been set for him or her elsewhere. The life world of the individual is reduced to that of an employee who must be motivated, led, communicated with, and 'en-roled' in an organisation not of his or her making; if successful in this transformation, the individual is then given the opportunity to become the motivator, leader, communicator and role-maker for others. Yet nowhere in this historical circle is there a place for critique and discourse.

With the sociological form, which has already been discussed to some degree in the loose coupling critique, there is this idea of a 'system' as a dominant motif. This concept, however, with its emphasis on adaptation and its use of largely organic metaphors, fails to explain the development of change — particularly revolutionary change — and of conflict. As a description of mechanical functioning, and even, on occasion, of organic functioning at a rather basic level, the term may prove to be a useful heuristic. However, when it is taken to cover human organisations, it becomes a mask which covers many institutional features. The possibilities of development, of critique and of action are absent from this formulation; organisations then become both reified and removed from the possibility of individual intervention.

By examining the dominance of psychologism and sociologism within the major paradigm, critical theory can provide the vital service of contributing to both a negative and a positive dialectic. The negative dialectic results in the exposure of dominating social structures — in our case, of placing the administration of school systems within the context of a modern industrial and capitalist order.

A positive dialectic, however, may be able to capture the potential for emancipatory action by conducting analyses and studies of educational communities as they interact with political and economic structures. The essential problem that may underlie the unfair distribution of cultural resources in schools may have to do with the distortion of communication within the school environment and the selective allocation of 'cultural capital' through linguistic structuring. Considering the educational institution as a speech community may allow one to understand patterns of distribution and allocation through hermeneutic, structural and critical methods.

The necessity for engaging in analyses of distorted communication is supported by the realisation that a condition for emancipatory relationships must be based on the ability of individuals to engage in uncoerced and rational discussion concerning their conditions of existence. Such discourse is hampered when norms of truth, freedom or justice are absent; thus critical theory must analyse the practical situation in terms of its distortion or destruction of such norms. Administrators, who may be said to be in a position of affecting such institutional relations, can — having been stripped of the ideology of dominance perpetuated through the normal science of administration — expose linguistic and cultural repressions in the school. Hurn has optimistically commented:

> New research on linguistic codes and on classroom interaction will, I hope, eventually help us to specify in considerable detail the barriers that prevent children from achieving the kinds of intellectual skills that only a minority presently achieve (Hurn 1978, p. 275).

Yet even such research can be used as a rationale for repression without the application of a critical theory and the development of a critical practice. Thus critical administrators need to call on positive knowledge (such as that concerning the nature of speech communities), on hermeneutic knowledge (for understanding the different life-worlds of different groups in the school), and critical knowledge (for reflecting on the limits and possibilities of the school institution).

In this sense, administrators need to be wary of the variety of functionalist formulations which are developed as explanations but which serve to maintain institutional structures and thereby perpetuate methods of domination. In contrast, a critical theory of administration would attempt to link together the material realities of the school with a dialectical reconstruction of the aims of education.

Conclusion

The loose coupling and institutional theories of organisations operate ly within a received paradigm. On a general scale, these ideas operate to sustain an ideology of the *appropriateness* of current structures and modes of organisation. While on a semantic level, the second-order theories of the rational, bureaucratic form are rejected by these conceptions, it would appear that they actually have only developed other names for the bureaucratic phenomenon and have displaced purposive-rational activity to the level of the system. In adopting a symbolic-interactionist perspective at the micro-level, these theories have ignored the possibility of participants 'constructing realities' *within the limits defined by a hegemonic structure which attempts to preserve its own dominance*. At the same time, the attempt to improve objective conditions within the confines of this hegemony is completely ignored by these theories. Thus, they continue to present an ideological portrait of organisations in society.

Organisations are seen to be stable and rational creations which contribute, in the case of educational organisations, to the maintenance of social stability. While interchange occurs in the quest for social certification and thus legitimation, there is no serious consideration given to the possibility that the legitimacy of the system itself may be in question not only by academics but by organisational members themselves.A loosely coupled environment does not allow for protests and conflicts as these are easily decoupled. But, in the participant's view, they occur. However, participants are given short shift in this view: as members of the system they seem to have little or no input into the political and social decisions being made. Thus the view of organisations that loose coupling provides is one of normalcy and acceptance: it is abstracted from its historical and political dimensions as these no longer inform the membership. It is a construct that therefore must become an abstracted empiricism, one that has no roots in the real world of interaction.

In contrast to this approach, we have reviewed the possibility of developing a positive dialectic, a negative dialectic and an ethnomethodological view of organisational reality. A positive dialectic tells us that we should consider (in addition to social constructionism): the totality of events which places organisations in a socio-historical context; the contradictions occurring in this reality which illuminate possibilities of change; and the dimensions of praxis which link together reflexive consideration with practical activity. A negative dialectic, on the other hand, orients us to a fundamental critique of the socio-economic relations which ultimately dictate our particular life-chances. It shows us how, and in what fashion, our subscription to beliefs in, say, systems of loose coupling confine our ability to break out of these paradigms and call for more dramatic equalisation of our opportunities. Finally, the ethnomethodological work reminds us that even theories are the constructions of individuals and that we make of our world what we will, *if* we can. Constructs that are employed in the analysis of our reality are just that: they themselves depend on their ability to be translated into natural language. But perhaps when returning to us in that fashion they carry with them a distortion of meaning.

In addition to these alternative perspectives on organisations generally, we have briefly reviewed some perspectives on educational administration in particular. Both Bates's and Foster's work offer more critical approaches to educational organisation than may be found within the loose coupling schema. The focus of these approaches emphasises the nature of the school as a cultural institution which contains an unequal distribution of resources; additionally, the possibility of administrators engaging in self-reflective activity critical of the paradigm within which administration itself is conceived seems to be implicit in these approaches.

Thus, when one examines loose coupling and institutional theories on the basis of their empirical validity, or on the basis of their ideological stance, or on the basis of their recycling of dominant frameworks, they are found lacking — if one is wanting to adopt a perspective which attempts to challenge 'the way things are'.

At the organisational level, one can take a more radical perspective on educational institutions than might be afforded by the loose coupling arguments. If, however, we have been trained in such a functionalist perspective, this amounts to revising our assumptions concerning the ontological and epistemological status of schools. It requires, in essence, taking a *critical* approach to education and to administration.

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Readings

1

Educational organizations as loosely coupled systems

K.E. Weick

Imagine that you're either the referee, coach, player or spectator at an unconventional soccer match: the field for the game is round; there are several goals scattered haphazardly around the circular field; people can enter and leave the game whenever they want to; they can throw balls in whenever they want; they can say "that's my goal" whenever they want to, as many times as they want to, and for as many goals as they want to; the entire game takes place on a sloped field; and the game is played as if it makes sense (March, personal communication).

If you now substitute in that example principals for referees, teachers for coaches, students for players, parents for spectators and schooling for soccer, you have an equally unconventional depiction of school organizations. The beauty of this depiction is that it captures a different set of realities within educational organizations than are caught when these same organizations are viewed through the tenets of bureaucratic theory.

Consider the contrast in images. For some time people who manage organizations and people who study this managing have asked, "How does an organization go about doing what it does and with what consequences for its people, processes, products, and persistence?" And for some time they've heard the same answers. In paraphrase the answers say essentially that an organization does what it does because of plans, intentional selection of means that get the organization to agree upon goals, and all of this is accomplished by such rationalized procedures as cost-benefit analyses, division of labor, specified areas of discretion, authority invested in the office, job descriptions, and a consistent evaluation and reward system. The only problem with that portrait is that it is rare in nature. People in organizations, including educational organizations, find themselves hard pressed either to find actual instances of those rational practices or to find rationalized practices whose outcomes have been as beneficent as predicted, or to feel that those rational occasions explain much of what goes on within the organization. Parts of some organizations are heavily rationalized but many parts also prove intractable to analysis through rational assumptions.

It is this substantial unexplained remainder that is the focus of this paper. Several people in education have expressed dissatisfaction with the prevailing ideas about organizations supplied by organizational theorists. Fortunately, they have also made some provocative suggestions about newer, more unconventional ideas about organizations that should be given serious thought. A good example of this is the following observation by John M. Stephens (1967: 9–11):

> [There is a] remarkable constancy of educational results in the face of widely differing deliberate approaches. Every so often we adopt new approaches or new methodologies and place our reliance on new panaceas. At the very least we seem to chorus new slogans. Yet the academic growth within the classroom continues at about the same rate, stubbornly refusing to cooperate with the bright new dicta emanating from the conference room . . . [These observations suggest that] we would be making a great mistake in regarding the management of schools as similar to the process of constructing a building or operating a factory. In these latter processes deliberate decisions play a crucial part, and the enterprise advances or stands still in proportion to the amount of deliberate effort exerted. If we must use a metaphor or model in seeking to understand the process of schooling, we should look to agriculture rather than to the factory. In agriculture we do not start from scratch, and we do not direct our efforts to inert and passive materials. We start, on the contrary, with a complex and ancient process, and we organize our efforts around what seeds, plants, and insects are likely to do anyway . . . . The crop, once planted, may undergo some development even while the farmer sleeps or loafs. No matter what he does, *some* aspects of the outcome will remain constant. When teachers and pupils foregather, some education may proceed even while the Superintendent disports himself in Atlantic City.

It is crucial to highlight what is important in the examples of soccer and schooling viewed as agriculture. To view these examples negatively and dismiss them by observing that "the referee should tighten up those rules," "superintendents don't do that," "schools are more sensible than that," or "these are terribly sloppy organizations" is to miss the point. The point is although researchers don't know what these kinds of structures are like but researchers do know they exist and that each of the negative judgments expressed above makes sense only if the observer assumes that organizations are constructed and managed according to rational assumptions and therefore are scrutable only when rational analyses are applied to them. This paper attempts to expand and enrich the set of ideas available to people when they try to make sense out of their organizational life. From this standpoint, it is unproductive to observe that fluid participation in schools and soccer is absurd. But it can be more interesting and productive to ask, how can it be that even though the activities in both situtations are only modestly connected, the situations are still recognizable and nameable? The goals, player movements, and trajectory of the ball are still recognizable and can be labeled "soccer." And despite variations in class size, format, locations, and architecture, the results are still recognized and can be labeled "schools." How can such loose assemblages retain sufficient similarity and permanence across time that they can be recognized, labeled, and dealt with? The prevailing ideas in organization theory do not shed much light on how such "soft" structures develop, persist, and impose crude orderliness among their elements. The basic premise here is that concepts such as loose coupling serve as sensitizing devices. They sensitize the observer to notice and question things that had previously been taken for granted. It is the intent of the program described here to develop a language for use in analyzing complex organizations, a language that may highlight features that have previously gone unnoticed. The guiding principle is a reversal of the common assertion, "I'll believe it when I see it" and presumes an epistemology that asserts, "I'll see it when I believe it." Organizations as loosely coupled systems may not have been seen before because nobody believed in them or could afford to believe in them. It is conceivable that preoccupation with rationalized, tidy, efficient, coordinated structures has blinded many practitioners as well as researchers to some of the attractive and unexpected properties of less rationalized and less tightly related clusters of events. This paper intends to eliminate such blindspots.

THE CONCEPT OF COUPLING

The phrase "loose coupling" has appeared in the literature (Glassman, 1973; March and Olsen, 1975) and it is important to highlight the connotation that is captured by this phrase and by no other. It might seem that the word coupling is synonymous with words like connection, link, or interdependence, yet each of these latter terms misses a crucial nuance.

By loose coupling, the author intends to convey the image that coupled events are responsive, *but* that each event also preserves its own identity and some evidence of its physical or logical separateness. Thus, in the case of an educational organization, it may be the case that the counselor's office is loosely coupled to the principal's office. The image is that the principal and the counselor are somehow attached, but that each retains some identity and separateness and that their attachment may be circumscribed, infrequent, weak in its mutual affects, unimportant, and/or slow to respond. Each of those connotations would be conveyed if the qualifier loosely were attached to the word coupled. Loose coupling also carries connotations of impermanence, dissolvability, and tacitness all of which are potentially crucial properties of the "glue" that holds organizations together.

Glassman (1973) categorizes the degree of coupling between two systems on the basis of the activity of the variables which the two systems share. To the extent that two systems either have few variables in common or share weak variables, they are independent of each other. Applied to the educational situation, if the principal-vice-principal-superintendent is regarded as one system and the teacher-classroom-pupil-parent-curriculum as another system, then by Glassman's argument if we did not find many variables in the teacher's world to be shared in the world of a principal and/or if the variables held in common were unimportant relative to the other variables, then the principal can be regarded as being loosely coupled with the teacher.

A final advantage of coupling imagery is that it suggests the idea of building blocks that can be grafted onto an organization or severed with relatively little disturbance to either the blocks or the organization. Simon (1969) has argued for the attractiveness of this feature in that most complex systems can be decomposed into stable subassemblies and that these are the crucial elements in any organization or system. Thus, the coupling imagery gives researchers access to one of the more powerful ways of talking about complexity now available.

But if the concept of loose coupling highlights novel images heretofore unseen in organizational theory, what is it about these images that is worth seeing?

COUPLED ELEMENTS

There is no shortage of potential coupling elements, but neither is the population infinite.

At the outset the two most commonly discussed coupling mechanisms are the technical core of the organization and the authority of office. The relevance of those two mechanisms for the issue of identifying elements is that in the case of technical couplings, each element is some kind of technology, task, subtask, role, territory and person, and the couplings are task-induced. In the case of authority as the coupling mechanism, the elements include positions, offices, responsibilities, opportunities, rewards, and sanctions and it is the couplings among these elements that presumably hold the organization together. A compelling argument can be made that *neither* of these coupling mechanisms is prominent in educational organizations found in the United States. This leaves one with the question what *does* hold an educational organization together?

A short list of potential elements in educational organizations will provide background for subsequent propositions. March and Olsen (1975) utilize the elements of intention and action. There is a developing position in psychology which argues that intentions are a poor guide for action, intentions often follow rather than precede action, and that intentions and action are loosely coupled. Unfortunately, organizations continue to think that planning is a good thing, they spend much time on planning, and actions are assessed in terms of their fit with plans. Given a potential loose coupling between the intentions and actions of organizational members, it should come as no surprise that administrators are baffled and angered when things never happen the way they were supposed to.

Additional elements may consist of events like yesterday and tomorrow (what happened yesterday may be tightly or loosely coupled with what happens tomorrow) or hierarchial positions, like, top and bottom, line and staff, or administrators and teachers. An interesting set of elements that lends itself to the loose coupling imagery is means and ends. Frequently, several different means lead to the same outcome. When this happens, it can be argued that any one means is loosely coupled to the end in the sense that there are alternative pathways to achieve that same end. Other elements that might be found in loosely coupled educational systems are teachers-materials, voters-schoolboard, administrators-classroom, process-outcome, teacher-teacher, parent-teacher, and teacher-pupil.

While all of these elements are obvious, it is not a trivial matter to specify which elements are coupled. As the concept of coupling is crucial because of its ability to highlight the identity and separateness of elements that are momentarily attached, that conceptual asset puts pressure on the investigator to specify clearly the identity, separateness, and boundaries of the elements coupled. While there is some danger of reification when that kind of pressure is exerted, there is the even greater danger of portraying organizations in inappropriate terms which suggest an excess of unity, integration, coordination, and consensus. If one is nonspecific about boundaries in defining elements then it is easy—and careless—to assemble these ill-defined elements and talk about integrated organizations. It is not a trivial issue explaining how elements persevere over time. Weick, for example, has argued (1974: 363–364) that elements may appear or disappear and may merge or become separated in response to need-deprivations within the individual, group, and/or organization. This means that specification of elements is not a one-shot activity. Given the context of most organizations, elements both appear and disappear over time. For this reason a theory of how elements become loosely or tightly coupled may also have to take account of the fact that the nature and intensity of the coupling may itself serve to create or dissolve elements.

The question of what is available for coupling and decoupling within an organization is an eminently practical question for anyone wishing to have some leverage on a system.

STRENGTH OF COUPLING

Obviously there is no shortage of meanings for the phrase loose coupling. Researchers need to be clear in their own thinking about whether the phenomenon they are studying is described by two words or three. A researcher can study "loose coupling" in educational organizations or "loosely coupled systems." The shorter phrase, "loose coupling," simply connotes things, "anythings," that may be tied together either weakly or infrequently or slowly or with minimal interdependence. Whether those things that are loosely coupled exist in a system is of minor importance. Most discussions in this paper concern loosely coupled systems rather than loose coupling since it wishes to clarify the concepts involved in the perseverance of sets of elements across time.

The idea of loose coupling is evoked when people have a variety of situations in mind. For example, when people describe loosely coupled systems they are often referring to (1) slack times—times when there is an excessive amount of resources relative to demands; (2) occasions when any one of several means will produce the same end; (3) richly connected networks in which influence is slow to spread and/or is weak while spreading; (4) a relative lack of coordination, slow coordination or coordination that is dampened as it moves through a system; (5) a relative absence of regulations; (6) planned unresponsiveness; (7) actual causal independence; (8) poor observational capabilities on the part of a viewer; (9) infrequent inspection of activities within the system; (10) decentralization; (11) delegation of discretion; (12) the absence of linkages that should be present based on some theory—for example, in educational organizations the expected feedback linkage from outcome back to inputs is often nonexistent; (13) the observation that an organization's structure is not coterminus with its activity; (14) those occasions when no matter what you do things always come out the same—for instance, despite all kinds of changes in curriculum, materials, groupings, and so forth the outcomes in an educational situation remain the same; and (15) curricula or courses in educational organizations for which there are few prerequistes—the longer the string of prerequisties, the tighter the coupling.

POTENTIAL FUNCTIONS AND DYSFUNCTIONS OF LOOSE COUPLING

It is important to note that the concept of loose coupling need not be used normatively. People who are steeped in the conventional literature of organizations may regard loose coupling as a sin or something to be apologized for. This paper takes a neutral, if not mildly affectionate, stance toward the concept. Apart from whatever affect one might feel toward the idea of loose coupling, it does appear a priori that

certain functions can be served by having a system in which the elements are loosely coupled. Below are listed seven potential functions that could be associated with loose coupling plus additional reasons why each advantage might also be a liability. The dialectic generated by each of these oppositions begins to suggest dependent variables that should be sensitive to variations in the tightness of coupling.
The basic argument of Glassman (1973) is that loose coupling allows some portions of an organization to persist. Loose coupling lowers the probability that the organization will have to—or be able to—respond to each little change in the environment that occurs. The mechanism of voting, for example, allows elected officials to remain in office for a full term even though their constituency at any moment may disapprove of particular actions. Some identity and separateness of the element "elected official" is preserved relative to a second element, "constituency," by the fact of loosely coupled accountability which is measured in two, four, or six year terms. While loose coupling may foster perseverance, it is not selective in what is perpetuated. Thus archaic traditions as well as innovative improvisations may be perpetuated.

A second advantage of loose coupling is that it may provide a sensitive sensing mechanism. This possibility is suggested by Fritz Heider's perceptual theory of things and medium. Heider (1959) argues that perception is most accurate when a medium senses a thing and the medium contains many independent elements that can be externally constrained. When elements in a medium become either fewer in number and/or more internally constrained and/or more interdependent, their ability to represent some remote thing is decreased. Thus sand is a better medium to display wind currents than are rocks, the reason being that sand has more elements, more independence among the elements, and the elements are subject to a greater amount of external constraint than is the case for rocks. Using Heider's formulation metaphorically, it could be argued that loosely coupled systems preserve many independent sensing elements and therefore "know" their environments better than is true for more tightly coupled systems which have fewer externally constrained, independent elements. Balanced against this improvement in sensing is the possibility that the system would become increasingly vulnerable to producing faddish responses and interpretations. If the environment is known better, then this could induce more frequent changes in activities done in response to this "superior intelligence."

A third function is that a loosely coupled system may be a good system for localized adaptation. If all of the elements in a large system are loosely coupled to one another, then any one element can adjust to and modify a local unique contingency without affecting the whole system. These local adaptations can be swift, relatively economical, and substantial. By definition, the antithesis of localized adaptation is standardization and to the extent that standardization can be shown to be desirable, a loosely coupled system might exhibit fewer of these presumed benefits. For example, the localized adaptation characteristic of loosely coupled systems may result in a lessening of educational democracy.

Fourth, in loosely coupled systems where the identity, uniqueness, and separateness of elements is preserved, the system potentially can retain a greater number of mutations and novel solutions than would be the case with a tightly coupled system. A loosely coupled system could preserve more "cultural insurance" to be drawn upon in times of radical change than in the case for more tightly coupled systems. Loosely coupled systems may be elegant solutions to the problem that adaptation can preclude adaptability. When a specific system fits into an ecological niche and does so with great success, this adaptation can be costly. It can be costly because resouces which are useless in a current environment might deteriorate or disappear even though they could be crucial in a modified environment. It is conceivable that loosely coupled systems preserve more diversity in responding than do tightly coupled systems, and therefore can adapt to a considerably wider range of changes in the environment than would be true for tightly coupled systems. To appreciate the possible problems associated with this abundance of mutations, reconsider the dynamic outlined in the preceding discussion of localized adaptation. If a local set of elements can adapt to local idiosyncracies without involving the whole system, then this same loose coupling could also forestall the spread of advantageous mutations that exist somewhere in the system. While the system may contain novel solutions for new problems of adaptation, the very structure that allows these mutations to flourish may prevent their diffusion.

Fifth, if there is a breakdown in one portion of a loosely coupled system then this breakdown is sealed off and does not affect other portions of the organization. Previously we had noted that loosely coupled systems are an exquisite mechanism to adapt swiftly to local novelties and unique problems. Now we are carrying the analysis one step further, and arguing that when any element misfires or decays or deteriorates, the spread of this deterioration is checked in a loosely coupled system. While this point is reminiscent of earlier functions, the emphasis here is on the localization of trouble rather than the localization of adaptation. But even this potential benefit may be problematic. A loosely coupled system can isolate its trouble spots and prevent the trouble from spreading, but it should be difficult for the loosely coupled system to repair the defective element. If weak influences pass from the defective portions to the functioning portions, then the influence back from these functioning portions will also be weak and probably too little, too late.

Sixth, since some of the most important elements in educational organizations are teachers, classrooms, principals, and so forth, it may be consequential that in a loosely coupled system there is more room available for self-determination by the actors. If it is argued that a sense of efficacy is crucial for human beings, then a sense of efficacy might be greater in a loosely coupled system with autonomous units than it would be in a tightly coupled system where discretion is limited. A futher comment can be made about self-determination to provide an example of the kind of imagery that is invoked by the concept of loose coupling.

It is possible that much of the teacher's sense of—and actual—control comes from the fact that diverse interested parties expect the teacher to link their intentions with teaching actions. Such linking of diverse intentions with actual work probably involves considerable negotiation. A parent complains about a teacher's action and the teacher merely points out to the parent how the actions are really correspondent with the parent's desires for the education of his or her children. Since most actions have ambiguous consequences, it should always be possible to justify the action as fitting the intentions of those who complain. Salancik (1975) goes even farther and suggests the intriguing possibility that when the consequences of an action are ambiguous, the stated *intentions* of the action serve as surrogates for the consequences. Since it is not known whether reading a certain book is good or bad for a child, the fact that it is intended to be good for the child itself becomes justification for having the child read it. The potential trade-off implicit in this function of loose coupling is fascinating. There is an increase in autonomy in the sense that resistance is heightened, but this heightened resistance occurs at the price of shortening the chain of consequences that will flow from each autonomous actor's efforts. Each teacher will have to negotiate separately with the same complaining parent.

Seventh, a loosely coupled system should be relatively inexpensive to run because it takes time and money to coordinate people. As much of what happens and should happen inside educational organizations seems to be defined and validated outside the organization, schools are in the business of building and maintaining categories, a business that requires coordination only on a few specific issues—for instance, assignment of teachers. This reduction in the necessity for coordination results in fewer conflicts, fewer inconsistencies among activities, fewer discrepancies between categories and activity. Thus, loosely coupled systems seem to hold the costs of coordination to a minimum. Despite this being an inexpensive system, loose coupling is also a nonrational system of fund allocation and therefore, unspecifiable, unmodifiable, and incapable of being used as means of change.

When these several sets of functions and dysfunctions are examined, they begin to throw several research issues into relief. For example, oppositions proposed in each of the preceding seven points suggest the importance of contextual theories. A predicted outcome or its opposite should emerge depending on how and in what the loosely coupled system is embedded. The preceding oppositions also suggest a fairly self-contained research program. Suppose a researcher starts with the first point made, as loose coupling increases the system should contain a greater number of anachronistic practices. Loosely coupled systems should be conspicuous for their cultural lags. Initially, one would like to know whether that is plausible or not. But then one would want to examine in more fine-grained detail whether those anachronistic practices that are retained hinder the system or impose structure and absorb uncertainty thereby producing certain economies in responding. Similar embellishment and elaboration is possible for each function with the result that rich networks of propositions become visible. What is especially attractive about these networks is that there is little precedent for them in the organizational literature. Despite this, these propositions contain a great deal of face validity when they are used as filters to look at educational organizations. When compared, for example, with the bureaucratic template mentioned in the introduction, the template associated with loosely coupled systems seems to take the observer into more interesting territory and prods him or her to ask more interesting questions.

METHODOLOGY AND LOOSE COUPLING

An initial warning to researchers: the empirical observation of unpredictability is insufficient evidence for concluding that the elements in a system are loosely coupled. Buried in that caveat are a host of methodological intricacies. While there is ample reason to believe that loosely coupled systems can be seen and examined, it is also possible that the appearance of loose coupling will be nothing more than a testimonial to bad methodology. In psychology, for example, it has been argued that the chronic failure to predict behavior from attitudes is due to measurement error and not to the unrelatedness of these two events. Attitudes are said to be loosely coupled with behavior but it may be that this conclusion is an artifact produced because attitudes assessed by time-independent and context-independent measures are being used to predict behaviors that are time and context dependent. If both attitudes and behaviors were assessed with equivalent measures, then tight coupling might be the rule.

Any research agenda must be concerned with fleshing out the imagery of loose coupling—a task requiring a considerable amount of conceptual work to solve a few specific and rather tricky methodological problems before one can investigate loose compling.

By definition, if one goes into an organization and watches which parts affect which other parts, he or she will see the tightly coupled parts and the parts that vary the most. Those parts which vary slightly, infrequently, and aperiodically will be less visible. Notice, for example, that interaction data—who speaks to whom about what—are unlikely to reveal loose couplings. These are the most visible and obvious couplings and by the arguments developed in this paper perhaps some of the least crucial to understand what is going on in the organization.

An implied theme in this paper is that people tend to overrationalize their activities and to attribute greater meaning, predictability, and coupling among them than in fact they have. If members tend to overrationalize their activity then their descriptions will not suggest which portions of that activity are loosely and tightly coupled. One might, in fact, even use the presence of apparent overrationalization as a potential clue that myth making, uncertainty, and loose coupling have been spotted.

J.G. March has argued that loose coupling can be spotted and examined only if one uses methodology that highlights and preserves rich detail about context. The necessity for a contextual methodology seems to arise, interestingly enough, from inside organization theory. The implied model involves cognitive limits on rationality and man as a single channel information processor. The basic methodological point is that if one wishes to observe loose coupling, then he has to see both what is and is not being done. The general idea is that time spent on one activity is time spent away from a second activity. A contextually sensitive methodology would record both the fact that some people are in one place generating events and the fact that these same people are thereby absent from some other place. The rule of thumb would be that a tight coupling in one part of the system can occur only if there is loose coupling in another part of the system. The problem that finite attention creates for a researcher is that if some outcome is observed for the organization, then it will not be obvious whether the outcome is due to activity in the tightly coupled sector or to inactivity in the loosely coupled sector. That is a provocative problem of interpretation. But the researcher should be forewarned that there are probably a finite number of tight couplings that can occur at any moment, that tight couplings in one place imply loose couplings elsewhere, and that it may be the *pattern* of couplings that produces the observed outcomes. Untangling such intricate issues may well require that new tools be developed for contextual understanding and that investigators be willing to substitute nonteleological thinking for teleological thinking (Steinbeck, 1941: chapt. 14).

Another contextually sensitive method is the use of comparative studies. It is the presumption of this methodology that taken-for-granted understandings—one possible "invisible" source of coupling in an otherwise loosely coupled system—are embedded in and contribute to a context. Thus, to see the effects of variations in these understandings one compares contexts that differ in conspicuous and meaningful ways.

Another methodological trap may await the person who tries to study loose coupling. Suppose one provides evidence that a particular goal is loosely coupled to a particular action. He or she says in effect, the person wanted to do this but in fact actually did that, thus, the action and the intention are loosely coupled. Now the problem for the researcher is that he or she may simply have focused on the wrong goal. There may be other goals which fit that particular action better. Perhaps if the researcher were aware of them, then the action and intention would appear to be tightly coupled. Any kind of intention-action, plan-behavior, or means-end depiction of loose coupling may be vulnerable to this sort of problem and an exhaustive listing of goals rather than parsimony should be the rule.

Two other methodological points should be noted. First, there are no good descriptions of the kinds of couplings that can occur among the several elements in educational organizations. Thus, a major initial research question is simply, what does a map of the couplings and elements within an educational organization look like? Second, there appear to be some fairly rich probes that might be used to uncover the nature of coupling within educational organizations. Conceivably, crucial couplings within schools involve the handling of disciplinary issues and social control, the question of how a teacher gets a book for the classroom, and the question of what kinds of innovations need to get clearance by whom. These relatively innocuous questions may be powerful means to learn which portions of a system are tightly and loosely coupled. Obviously these probes would be sampled if there was a full description of possible elements that can be coupled and possible kinds and strengths of couplings. These specific probes suggest, however, in addition that what holds an educational organization together may be a small number of tight couplings in out-of-the-way places.

ILLUSTRATIVE QUESTIONS FOR A RESEARCH AGENDA

Patterns of Loose and Tight Coupling: Certification versus Inspection

Suppose one assumes that education is an intrinsically uninspected and unevaluated activity. If education is intrinsically uninspected and unevaluated then how can one establish that it is occurring? One answer is to define clearly who can and who cannot do it and to whom. In an educational organization this is the activity of certification. It is around the issues of certification and of specifying who the pupils are that tight coupling would be predicted to occur when technology and outcome are unclear.

If one argues that "certification" is the question "who does the work" and "inspection" is the question "how well is the work done," then there can be either loose or tight control over either certification or inspection. Notice that setting the problem up this way suggests the importance of discovering the distribution of tight and loosely coupled systems within any organization. Up to now the phrase loosely coupled systems has been used to capture the fact that events in an organization seem to be temporally related rather than logically related (Cohen and March, 1974). Now that view is being enriched by arguing that any organization must deal with issues of certification (who does the work) and inspection (how well is the work done). It is further being suggested that in the case of educational organizations there is loose control on the work—the work is intrinsically uninspected and unevaluated or if it is evaluated it is done so infrequently and in a perfunctory manner—but that under these conditions it becomes crucial for the organization to have tight control over who does the work and on whom. This immediately suggests the importance of comparative research in which the other three combinations are examined, the question being how do these alternative forms grow, adapt, manage their rhetoric and handle their clientele. Thus it would be important to find organizations in which the controls over certification and inspection are both loose, organizations where there is loose control over certification but tight control over inspection, and organizations in which there is tight control both over inspection and over certification. Such comparative research might be conducted among different kinds of educational organizations within a single country (military, private, religious schooling in the United States), between educational and noneducational organizations within the same country (for example, schools versus hospitals versus military versus business organizations) or between countries looking at solutions to the problem of education given different degrees of centralization. As suggested earlier, it may not be the existence or nonexistence of loose coupling that is a crucial determinant of organizational functioning over time but rather the patterning of loose and tight couplings. Comparative studies should answer the question of distribution.

If, as noted earlier, members within an organization (and researchers) will see and talk clearly about only those regions that are tightly coupled, then this suggests that members of educational organizations should be most explicit and certain when they are discussing issues related to certification for definition and regulation of teachers, pupils, topics, space, and resources. These are presumed to be the crucial issues that are tightly controlled. Increasing vagueness of description should occur when issues of substantive instruction—inspection—are discussed. Thus, those people who primarily manage the instructional business will be most vague in describing what they do, those people who primarily manage the certification rituals will be most explicit. This pattern is predicted *not* on the basis of the activities themselves—certification is easier to describe than inspection—but rather on the basis of the expectation that tightly coupled subsystems are more crucial to the survival of the system and therefore have received more linguistic work in the past and more agreement than is true for loosely coupled elements.

Core Technology and Organizational Form

A common tactic to understand complex organizations is to explore the possibility that the nature of the task being performed determines the shape of the organizational structure. This straightforward tactic raises some interesting puzzles about educational organizations. There are suggestions in the literature that education is a diffuse task, the technology is uncertain.

This first question suggests two alternatives: if the task is diffuse then would not any organizational form whatsoever be equally appropriate *or* should this directly compel a diffuse form of organizational structure? These two alternatives are not identical. The first suggests that if the task is diffuse then any one of a variety of quite specific organizational forms could be imposed on the organization and no differences would be observed. The thrust of the second argument is that there is one and only one organizational form that would fit well when there is a diffuse task, namely, a diffuse organizational form (for instance, an organized anarchy).

The second question asks if the task in an educational organization is diffuse then why do all educational organizations look the way they do, and why do they all look the same? If there is no clear task around which the shape of the organization can be formed then why is it that most educational organizations do have a form and why is it that most of these forms look indentical? One possibile answer is that the tasks of educational organizations does not constrain the form of the organization but rather this constraint is imposed by the ritual of certification and/or the agreements that are made in and by the environment. If any of these nontask possibilities are genuine alternative explanations, then the general literature on organizations has been insensitive to them.

One is therefore forced to ask the question, is it the case within educational organizations that the technology is unclear? So far it has been argued that loose coupling in educational organizations is partly the result of uncertain technology. If uncertain technology does not generate loose coupling then researchers must look elsewhere for the origin of these bonds.

Making Sense in/of Loosely Coupled Worlds

What kinds of information do loosely coupled systems provide members around which they can organize meanings, that is, what can one use in order to make sense of such fleeting structures? (By definition loosely coupled events are modestly predictable at best.) There is a rather barren structure that can be observed, reported on, and retrospected in order to make any sense. Given the ambiguity of loosely coupled structures, this suggests that there may be increased pressure on members to construct or negotiate some kind of social reality they can live with. Therefore, under conditions of loose coupling one should see considerable effort devoted to constructing social reality, a great amount of face work and linguistic work, numerous myths (Mitroff and Kilmann, 1975) and in general one should find a considerable amount of effort being devoted to punctuating this loosely coupled world and connecting it in some way in which it can be made sensible. Loosely coupled worlds do not look as if they would provide an individual many resources for sense making—with such little assistance in this task, a predominant activity should involve constructing social realities. Tightly coupled portions of a system should not exhibit nearly this preoccupation with linguistic work and the social construction of reality.

Coupling as a Dependent Variable

As a general rule, any research agenda on loose coupling should devote equal attention to loose coupling as a dependent and independent variable. Most suggestions have treated loose coupling as an independent variable. Less attention has been directed toward loose coupling as a dependent variable with the one exception of the earlier argument that one can afford loose coupling in either certification or inspection but not in both and, therefore, if one can locate a tight coupling for one of these two activities then he can predict as a dependent variable loose coupling for the other one.

Some investigators, however, should view loose coupling consistently as a dependent variable. The prototypic question would be, given prior conditions such as competition for scarce resources, logic built into a task, team teaching, conflict, striving for professionalism, presence of a central ministry of education, tenure, and so forth, what kind of coupling (loose or tight) among what kinds of elements occurs? If an organization faces a scarcity of resources its pattern of couplings should differ from when it faces an expansion of resources (for instance, scarcity leads to stockpiling leads to decoupling). Part of the question here is, what kinds of changes in the environment are the variables of tight and loose coupling sensitive to? In response to what kinds of activities or what kinds of contexts is coupling seen to change and what kinds of environments or situations, when they change, seem to have no effect whatsoever on couplings within an organization? Answers to these questions, which are of vital importance in predicting the outcomes of any intervention, are most likely to occur if coupling is treated as a dependent variable and the question is, under what conditions will the couplings that emerge be tight or loose?

Assembling Loosely Connected Events

Suppose one assumes that there is nothing in the world except loosely coupled events. This assumption is close to Simon's stable subassemblies and empty world hypothesis and to the idea of cognitive limits on rationality. The imagery is that of numerous clusters of events that are tightly coupled within and loosely coupled between. These larger loosely coupled units would be what researchers usually call organizations. Notice that organizations formed this way are rather unusual kinds of organizations because they are neither tightly connected, nor explicitly bounded, but they are stable. The research question then becomes, how does it happen that loosely coupled events which remain loosely coupled are institutionally held together in one organization which retains few controls over central activities? Stated differently, how does it happen that someone can take a series of loosely coupled events, assemble them into an organization of loosely coupled systems, and the events remain both loosely coupled but the organization itself survives? It is common to observe that large organizations have loosely connected sectors. The questions are, what makes this possible, how does it happen? What the structure in school systems seems to consist of is categories (for example, teacher, pupil, reading) which are linked by understanding and legitimated exogenously (that is, by the world outside the organization). As John Meyer (1975) puts it, "the system works because everyone knows everyone else knows roughly what is to go on . . . . Educational organizations are holding companies containing shares of stock in uninspected activities and subunits which are largely given their meaning, reality, and value in the wider social market." Note the potential fragility of this fabric of legitimacy.

It remains to be seen under what conditions loosely coupled systems are fragile structures because they are shored up by consensual anticipations, retrospections, and understanding that can dissolve and under what conditions they are resilient structures because they contain mutations, localized adaptation, and fewer costs of coordination.

Separate Intending and Acting Components

Intention and action are often loosely coupled within a single individual. Salancik (1975) has suggested some conditions under which dispositions within a single individual may be loosely coupled. These include such suggestions as follows. (1) If intentions are not clear and unambiguous, then the use of them to select actions which will fulfill the intentions will be imperfect. (2) If the consequences of action are not known, then the use of intention to select action will be imperfect. (3) If the means by which an intention is transformed into an action are not known or in conflict, then the coupling of action to intention will be imperfect. (4) If intentions are not known to a person at the time of selecting an action, then the relationships between action and intention will be imperfect. This may be more common than expected because this possibility is not allowed by so-called rational models of man. People often have to recall their intentions after they act or reconstruct these intentions, or invent them. (5) If there exists a set of multiple intentions which can determine a set of similar multiple actions, then the ability to detect a relationship between any one intention and any one action is likely to be imperfect. To illustrate, if there is an intention A which implies selecting actions X and Y, and there is also an intention B which implies selecting actions X and Y, then it is possible that under both presence and absence of intention A, action X will be selected. Given these circumstances, an observer will falsely conclude that this relationship is indeterminant.

The preceding list has the potential limitation for organizational inquiry in that it consists of events within a single person. This limitation is not serious *if* the ideas are used as metaphors or if each event is lodged in a different person. For example, one could lodge intention with one person and action with some other person. With this separation, then all of the above conditions may produce loose coupling between these actors but additional conditions also come into play given this geographical separation of intention from action. For example, the simple additional requirement that the intentions must be communicated to the second actor and in such a way that they control his actions, will increase the potential for error and loose coupling. Thus any discussion of separate locations for intention and action within an organization virtually requires that the investigator specify the additional conditions under which the intending component can control the acting component. Aside from the problems of communication and control when intention and action are separated there are at least two additional conditions that could produce loose coupling.

1. If there are several diverse intending components all of whom are dependent on the same actor for implementing action, then the relationship between any one intention and any one action will be imperfect. The teacher in the classroom may well be the prototype of this condition.

2. The process outlined in the preceding item can become even more complicated, and the linkages between intention and action even looser, if the single acting component has intentions of its own.

Intention and action are often split within organizations. This paper suggests that if one were to map the pattern of intention and action components within the organization these would coincide with loosely coupled systems identified by other means. Furthermore, the preceding propositions begin to suggest conditions under which the same components might be at one moment tightly coupled and at the next moment loosely coupled.

CONCLUSION: A STATEMENT OF PRIORITIES

More time should be spent examining the possibility that educational organizations are most usefully viewed as loosely coupled systems. The concept of organizations as loosely coupled systems can have a substantial effect on existing perspectives about organizations. To probe further into the plausibility of that assertion, it is suggested that the following research priorities constitute a reasonable approach to the examination of loosely coupled systems.

1. Develop Conceptual Tools Capable of Preserving Loosely Coupled Systems

It is clear that more conceptual work has to be done before other lines of inquiry on this topic are launched. Much of the blandness in organizational theory these days can be traced to investigators applying impoverished images to organizational settings. If researchers immediately start stalking the elusive loosely coupled system with imperfect language and concepts, they will perpetuate the blandness of organizational theory. To see the importance of and necessity for this conceptual activity the reader should reexamine the 15 different connotations of the phrase "loose coupling" that are uncovered in this paper. They provide 15 alternative explanations for any researcher who claims that some outcome is due to loose coupling.

2. Explicate What Elements Are Available in Educational Organizations for Coupling

This activity has high priority because it is essential to know the practical domain within which the coupling phenomena occur. Since there is the further complication that elements may appear or disappear as a function of context and time, this type of inventory is essential at an early stage of inquiry. An indirect benefit of making this a high priority activity is that it will stem the counterproductive suspicion that "the number of elements in educational organizations is infinite." The reasonable reply to that comment is that if one is precise in defining and drawing boundaries around elements, then the number of elements will be less than imagined. Furthermore, the researcher can reduce the number of relevant elements if he has some theoretical ideas in mind. These theoretical ideas should be one of the outcomes of initial activity devoted to language and concept development (Priority 1).

3. Develop Contextual Methodology

Given favorable outcomes from the preceding two steps, researchers should then be eager to look at complex issues such as patterns of tight and loose coupling keeping in mind that loose coupling creates major problems for the researcher because he is trained and equipped to decipher predictable, tightly coupled worlds. To "see" loosely coupled worlds unconventional methodologies need to be developed and conventional methodologies that are underexploited need to be given more attention. Among the existing tools that should be refined to study loose coupling are comparative studies and longitudinal studies. Among the new tools that should be "invented" because of their potential relevance to loosely coupled systems are nonteleological thinking (Steinbeck, 1941), concurrence methodology (Bateson, 1972: 180–201), and Hegelian, Kantian, and Singerian inquiring systems (Mitroff, 1974). While these latter methodologies are unconconventional within social science, so too is it unconventional to urge that we treat unpredictability (loose coupling) as our topic of interest rather than a nuisance.

4. Promote the Collection of Thorough, Concrete Descriptions of the Coupling Patterns in Actual Educational Organizations

No descriptive studies have been available to show what couplings in what patterns and with what strengths existed in current educational organizations. This oversight should be remedied as soon as possible.

Adequate descriptions should be of great interest to the practitioner who wants to know how his influence attempts will spread and with what intensity. Adequate description should also show practitioners how their organizations may be more sensible and adaptive than they suspect. Thorough descriptions of coupling should show checks and balances, localized controls, stabilizing mechanisms, and subtle feedback loops that keep the organization stable and that would promote its decay if they were tampered with.

The benefits for the researcher of full descriptions are that they would suggest which locations and which questions about loose coupling are most likely to explain sizeable portions of the variance in organizational outcomes. For example, on the basis of good descriptive work, it might be found that both tightly and loosely coupled systems "know" their environments with equal accuracy in which case, the earlier line of theorizing about "thing and medium" would be given a lower priority.

5. Specify the Nature of Core Technology in Educational Organizations

A suprisingly large number of the ideas presented in this paper assume that the typical coupling mechanisms of authority of office and logic of the task do not operate in educational organizations. Inquiry into loosely coupled systems was triggered partly by efforts to discover what *does* accomplish the coupling in school systems. Before the investigation of loose coupling goes too far, it should be established that authority and task are not prominent coupling mechanisms in schools. The assertions that they are not prominent seem to issue from a combination of informal observation, implausibility, wishful thinking, looking at the wrong things, and rather vague definitions of core technology and reward structures within education. If these two coupling mechanisms were defined clearly, studied carefully, and found to be weak and/or nonexistent in schools, *then* there would be a powerful justification for proceeding vigorously to study loosely coupled systems. Given the absence of work that definitively discounts these coupling mechanisms in education and given the fact that these two mechanisms have accounted for much of the observed couplings in other kinds of organizations, it seems crucial to look for them in educational organizations in the interest of parsimony.

It should be emphasized that if it *is* found that substantial coupling within educational organizations is due to authority of office and logic of the task, this does not negate the agenda that is sketched out in this paper. Instead, such discoveries would (1) make it even more crucial to look for patterns of coupling to explain outcomes, (2) focus attention on tight and loose couplings within task and authority induced couplings, (3) alert researchers to keep close watch for any coupling mechanisms other than these two, and (4) would direct comparative research toward settings in which these two coupling mechanisms vary in strength and form.

6. Probe Empirically the Ratio of Functions to Dysfunctions Associated with Loose Coupling

Although the word "function" has had a checkered history, it is used here without apology—and without the surplus meanings and ideology that have become attached to it. Earlier several potential benefits of loose coupling were described and these descriptions were balanced by additional suggestions of potential liabilities. If one adopts an evolutionary epistemology, then over time one expects that entities develop a more exquisite fit with their ecological niches. Given that assumption, one then argues that if loosely coupled systems exist and if they have existed for sometime, then they bestow some net advantage to their inhabitants and/or their constituencies. It is not obvious, however, what these advantages are. A set of studies showing how schools benefit and suffer given their structure as loosely coupled systems should do much to improve the quality of thinking devoted to organizational analysis.

7. Discover How Inhabitants Make Sense Out of Loosely Coupled Worlds

Scientists are going to have some big problems when their topic of inquiry becomes low probability couplings, but just as scientists have special problems comprehending loosely coupled worlds so too must the inhabitants of these worlds. It would seem that quite early in a research program on loose coupling, examination of this question should be started since it has direct relevance to those practitioners who must thread their way through such "invisible" worlds and must concern their sense-making and stories in such a way that they don't bump into each other while doing so.

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2 The concept of organization

E. Bittner

In recent years a good deal of the very best sociological work has been devoted to the study of organization. Although the term, organization, belongs to the category of expressions about which there is maintained an air of informed vagueness, certain special conventions exist that focus its use, with qualifications, on a delimited set of phenomena. In accordance with these conventions, the term applies correctly to stable associations of persons engaged in concerted activities directed to the attainment of specific objectives. It is thought to be a decisive characteristic of such organizations that they are deliberately instituted relative to these objectives. Because organizations, in this sense, are implementing and implemented programs of action that involve a substantial dose of comprehensive and rational planning, they are identified as instances of formal or rational organization in order to differentiate them from other forms.[1]

It has been one of the most abiding points of interest of modern organizational research to study how well the programmatically intended formal structures of organizations describe what is going on within them, and what unintended, unprogrammed, and thus informal structures tend to accompany them.

How do sociologists go about distinguishing the facts of formal organization from the facts of informal organization? There seem to be two things that matter in the ways this distinction is drawn. There is, in the first place, a certain scholarly tradition in which the distinction is rooted. It dates back to Pareto's definition of rationality, Tönnies' typology, Cooley's concept of primary-group, and – tracing through the seminal achievement of the Hawthorn studies – the tradition is very much alive today. Being steeped in this line of scholarship allows a sociologist to claim his colleagues' consent to the decisions he makes. In this way the distinction is a fact of life in sociological inquiry, and perceiving it correctly is a trademark of professional competence. Although this is undoubtedly a potent factor in many decisions, it does not furnish a clear-cut rule for the distinction.[2]

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[1] These characteristics are generally noted when the task is to identify real instances of 'formal organization'. Cf. Blau and Scott (1962), Etzioni (1961) and Parsons (1960, pp. 16–96). Various authors have studied such organizations in ways that seem to disregard the identifying characteristics, or to subordinate them to other interests. To study a phenomenon while suspending the relevance of that feature by which it is recognized is not an unusual procedure, though it produces peculiar problems. G. E. Moore and Edmund Husserl have explored these problems from substantially different perspectives.

The rule, which is the second consideration, can be stated as follows: In certain presumptively identified fields of action, the observed stable patterns of conduct and relations can be accounted for by invoking some *programmatic constructions* that define them prospectively. In so far as the observed stable patterns match the dispositions contained in the program they are instances of formal organizational structure. Whereas, if it can be shown that the program did not provide for the occurrence of some other observed patterns which seem to have grown spontaneously, these latter belong to the domain of the informal structures.

Despite its apparent cogency, the rule is insufficient. The programmatic construction is itself a part of the presumptively identified field of action, and thus the sociologist finds himself in the position of having borrowed a concept from those he seeks to study in order to describe what he observes about them.

In general, there is nothing wrong with borrowing a common-sense concept for the purposes of sociological inquiry. Up to a certain point it is, indeed, unavoidable. The warrant for this procedure is the sociologist's interest in exploring the common-sense perspective. The point at which the use of common-sense concepts becomes a transgression is where such concepts are expected to do the analytical work of theoretical concepts. When the actor is treated as a permanent auxiliary to the enterprise of sociological inquiry at the same time that he is the object of its inquiry, there arise ambiguities that defy clarification. Now, if the idea of formal structure is basically a common-sense notion, what role can it have in sociological inquiry?

The theoretical sense of formal structures of organization

In an influential essay published fifteen years ago, Philip Selznick (1948) explicitly addressed the problem of the theoretical significance of formal constructions by relating them, as facts of life, to functional imperatives of organizations conceived as cooperative-adaptive systems. Arguing along the lines of structural-functional analysis, he showed convincingly why 'formal administrative design can never adequately or fully reflect the concrete organization to which it refers', but is nevertheless a relevant element in the sociological study of organizations. In his view, the design represents that particular conception of organization which management technicians seek to explicate. Even though there may attach to these explications some descriptive or analytic intent, they are primarily active elements of the concrete phenomenon of organization rather than disinterested statements about it. As such, the presence of rational organizational design in social systems of action is a source of tension and dilemma. These consequences arise out of the 'recalcitrance of the tools of action', relative to the 'freedom of technical or ideal choice' reflected in plans and programs.

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[2] It should not be thought that such grounds are wholly particular to the procedures of sociological inquiry. The distinguished physical chemist G. N. Lewis pointed out that a traditional conception of causality has led to an arbitrary interpretation of Maxwell's equations with the consequent development of a special electromagnetic theory of light. On purely theoretical grounds an entirely different development was equally justified and did occur later, making possible the development of quantum electromechanics. See Whitrow (1963, pp. 25–35).

It is important to note that in this new and rich context the old conception of formal organization, which is traceable to Max Weber, remained intact. Together with Weber, Selznick assumes that the formal structures represent an ideally possible, but practically unattainable state of affairs. While Weber outlined the contents of the normative idealization in general terms, Selznick pointed out that the normative idealization, to be an effective source of restraint, must be constantly adapted to the impact of functional imperatives of social systems. Thus he furnished the necessary theoretical argument for an entire field of sociological investigations by directing attention to a sphere of adaptive and cooperative manipulations, and to the tensions typically found in it.

Despite the gain, the argument retains a certain theoretical short circuit. While Selznick quite clearly assigns the formal schemes to the domain of sociological data, he does not explore the full range of consequences arising out of this decision. By retaining Weber's conception of them as normative idealizations, Selznick avoids having to consider what the constructions of rational conduct mean to, and how they are used by, persons who have to live with them from day to day. It could be, however, that the rational schemes appear as unrealistic normative idealizations only when one considers them literally, i.e. without considering some tacit background assumptions that bureaucrats take for granted.

In the following we shall endeavor to show that the literal interpretation of formal schemes is not only inappropriate but, strictly speaking, impossible. We shall further show that the tacit assumptions are not simply unspecified, but instead come to the fore only on occasions of actual reference to the formal scheme. Finally, we shall argue that the meaning and import of the formal schemes must remain undetermined unless the circumstances and procedures of its actual use by actors is fully investigated.

Critique of Weber's theory of bureaucracy

We shall introduce our argument by considering Weber's work critically because the short circuit in theorizing occurred first in his work and because most of contemporary research in formal organization claims to stand in some sort of relationship to the definitions formulated by him. We shall be discussing the theory of bureaucracy as the most general case of many possible, more specific, rational schemes. But what we say about the general form is applicable to such specific instances as manuals of operations, tables of organization or programs of procedure.

Weber used the concept of organization to refer to a network of authority distribution.[3] As is well known, he asserted that such a network may be said to exist when and in so far as there prevails a high degree of correspondence between the substance of commands and conditions favoring compliance with them. Confining our interest to bureaucracy, we note that the condition favoring compliance with its authority structure lies in its acceptance as being efficient (Gerth and Mills, 1948, pp. 214–16). From this premise, pure bureaucracy obtains when the principle of technical efficiency is given overriding priority above all other considerations. The ideal type of bureaucracy is, consequently, the product of ostensibly free conceptual play with this principle.

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[3] Unfortunately there exists some confusion on this point. Weber himself uses the term organization as we have stated; cf. Weber (1954, Kapitel IX, Abschnitt I. #3). The German term 'Organisation' is translated by Shils and Rheinstein as 'organization' in Rheinstein (1954, ch. 12, sect. 3). On the other hand, Henderson and Parsons translate Weber's German term 'Betrieb' as 'organization'. The reason for this choice is that Weber's definition of 'Betrieb' coincides with Alfred Marshall's definition of 'organization' in economic theory. More important than the question of 'authenticity' is, however, the fact that Weber's statement on 'Betrieb' is almost never cited in modern organizational studies while his work on authority is widely used.

To say, however, that the resulting scheme is a meaningful conceptualization indicates that the ideal of efficiency is exercised over a domain of objects and events that are known to exist and that are known to possess independent qualities of their own. The efficiency principle merely selects, identifies, and orders those existing elements of a scene of action that are perceived as related to it. The relevance of the known qualities of things becomes very apparent when one considers that it must be at least possible for them to be related in ways that the idealization stipulates. What sorts of things are taken for granted may vary, but it is not possible to have any rational construction of reality that does not rest on some such tacit assumptions.[4]

It could be said that this is not an unusual state of affairs. In scientific inquiry it is always the case that in order to assert anything one must leave some things unsaid. Such unsaid things stand under the protection of the *ceteris paribus* clause. The use of this clause is, however, restricted and its contents are always open to scrutiny.[5]

When one lifts the mantle of protection from the unstated presupposition surrounding the terms of Weber's theory of bureaucracy one is confronted with facts of a particular sort. These facts are not sociological data, or even theoretically defensible hypotheses. Instead, one is confronted with a rich and ambiguous body of background information that normally competent members of society take for granted as commonly known. In its normal functioning this information furnishes the tacit foundation for all that is explicitly known, and provides the matrix for all deliberate considerations without being itself deliberately considered. While its content can be raised to the level of analysis, this typically does not occur. Rather, the information enters into that commonplace and practical orientation to reality which members of society regard as 'natural' when attending to their daily affairs. Since the explicit terms of the theory are embedded in this common-sense orientation, they cannot be understood without tacit reference to it. If, however, the theorist must be persuaded about the meaning of the terms in some prior and unexplicated way, there then exists collusion between him and those about whom he theorizes. We call this unexplicated understanding collusive because it is a hidden resource, the use of which cannot be controlled adequately.

Some examples will help to clarify this point. Consider the term 'employee'. There is little doubt that Weber presupposed, rather than neglected, a whole realm of background information in using it. Certainly employees must be human beings of either the male or female sex, normally competent adults rather than children, and in many ways familiar types of persons whose responsiveness, interests, inclinations, capacities and foibles are in a basic sense known as a matter of course. All this information is obvious, of course, but does not by any means coincide with the scientifically demonstrable or even scientifically tenable. Rather, the full meaning of the term 'employee', as it is used in the theory of bureaucracy, refers to that understanding of it which fully franchised persons in society expect from one another when they converse on matters of practical import. That is, in so far as the term refers meaningfully to some determinate object, it does so only in the context of actors making common sense of it in consequential situations.

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[4] It has been proposed that this restriction extends to all types of rational constructions. For a critique of Russell's mathematical logic along these lines see Charlsworth (1959, ch. 2).

[5] Concerning the role of the *ceteris paribus* clause in economic analysis see Kaufman (1958, ch. 16).

Let us consider the ideal of efficiency itself. While Weber is quite clear in stating that the sole justification of bureaucracy is its efficiency, he provides us with no clear-cut guide on how this standard of judgement is to be used. Indeed, the inventory of features of bureaucracy contains not one single item that is not arguable relative to its efficiency function. Long-range goals cannot be used definitively for calculating it because the impact of contingent factors multiplies with time and makes it increasingly difficult to assign a determinate value to the efficiency of a stably controlled segment of action. On the other hand, the use of short-term goals in judging efficiency may be in conflict with the ideal of economy itself. Not only do short-term goals change with time and compete with one another in indeterminate ways, but short-term results are of notoriously deceptive value because they can be easily manipulated to show whatever one wishes them to show (cf. Haire, 1962, especially pp. 8–10). Clearly, what Weber had in mind when speaking about efficiency was not a formally independent criterion of judgement but an ideal that is fully attuned to practical interests as these emerge and are pursued in the context of every-day life. The standard itself and the correct way to use it are, therefore, a part of the selfsame order of action that they purport to control. The power and right to judge some procedure as more or less efficient require the same kind of sensitivity, responsiveness and competence that using the procedure presupposes in the first place. Only those who have serious business in doing what must be done are also franchised to judge it.

Weber, of course, intended to achieve an idealized reconstruction of organization from the perspective of the actor. He fell short of attaining this objective precisely to the extent that he failed to explore the underlying common-sense presuppositions of his theory. He failed to grasp that the meaning and warrant of the inventory of the properties of bureaucracy are inextricably embedded in what Alfred Schutz called the attitudes of every-day life and in socially sanctioned common-sense typifications (Schutz, 1953).

Thus, if the theory of bureaucracy is a theory at all, it is a refined and purified version of the actors' theorizing. To the extent that it is a refinement and purification of it, it is, by the same token, a corrupt and incomplete version of it; for it is certainly not warranted to reduce the terms of common-sense discourse to a lexicon of culturally coded significances to satisfy the requirements of theoretical postulation. This is the theoretical shortcut we mentioned at the beginning of our remarks.

The study of the concept of organization as a common-sense construct

Plucked from its native ground, i.e. the world of common sense, the concept of rational organization, and the schematic determinations that are subsumed under it, are devoid of information on how its terms relate to facts. Without knowing the structure of this relationship of reference, the meaning of the concept and its terms cannot be determined.

In this situation an investigator may use one of three research procedures. He can, for one thing, proceed to investigate formal organization while assuming that the unexplicated common-sense meanings of the terms are adequate definitions for the purposes of his investigation. In this case, he must use that which he proposes to study as a resource for studying it.

He can, in the second instance, attach to the terms a more or less arbitrary meaning by defining them operationally. In this case, the relationship of reference between the term and the facts to which it refers will be defined by the operations of inquiry. Interest in the actor's perspective is either deliberately abandoned, or some fictitious version of it is adopted.

The investigator can, in the last instance, decide that the meaning of the concept, and of all the terms and determinations that are subsumed under it, must be discovered by studying their use in real scenes of action by persons whose competence to use them is socially sanctioned.

It is only the last case which yields entirely to the rule specifying the relevance of the perspective of the actor in sociological inquiry. This is so because in order to understand the meaning of the actor's thought and action, which Weber sought, one must study *how* the terms of his discourse are assigned to real objects and events by normally competent persons in ordinary situations.

In so far as the procedures and considerations actors invoke in relating terms of rational common-sense construction to things in the world exhibit some stable properties, they may be called a method. It is, of course, not proper to assume that this method is identical with, or even similar to, the method of scientific inquiry. Garfinkel proposed that in order to differentiate the study of this method from the study of the methods of scientific inquiry it be called ethnomethodology.

In the following we shall propose in brief outline a program of inquiry which takes as its object of interest the study of the methodical use of the rational constructions subsumed under the concept of organization. We shall also present examples of this program. The concept itself and its methodical use are, of course, defined as belonging entirely to the domain of facts.

We must emphasize that our interest is in outlining a program of inquiry, not in producing a theory of organization. It has to be this way because the inquiry cannot get under way without first employing the very sensibilities that it seeks to study, i.e. the common-sense outlook. At the outset the phenomenon of organization comes to our attention in just the way it comes to the attention of any normal member of our linguistic community. Even as we turn to the investigation of the common-sense presuppositions in which it is embedded, and from which it derives its socially sanctioned sense, other common-sense presuppositions will continue to insinuate themselves into our thinking and observation. The important point in the proposed study is that we must be prepared to treat every substantive determination we shall formulate as a case for exploring the background information on which it in turn rests.

By way of defining our task we propose that *the study of the methodical use of the concept of organization seeks to describe the mechanisms of sustained* *and sanctioned relevance of the rational constructions to a variety of objects, events and occasions relative to which they are invoked.*

In order to free ourselves progressively from the encumbrance of presumptive understanding we shall take two preliminary measures. First, the author of the rational scheme, typically the managerial technician who deals with organization in the 'technical sense', will not be treated as having some sort of privileged position for understanding its meaning. By denying him the status of the authoritative interpreter we do not propose to tamper with the results of his work in the least. From our point of view he is merely the toolsmith. It seems reasonable that if one were to investigate the meaning and typical use of some tool, one would not want to be confined to what the toolmaker has in mind.

Second, we will not look to the obvious or conspicuous meaning of the expressions used in the scheme to direct us to objects and events which they identify. Rather, we will look for the way the scheme is brought to bear on whatever happens within the scope of its jurisdiction. The consequence of this step is that the question of what the scheme selects and neglects is approached by asking how certain objects and events meet, or are made to meet, the specifications contained in the scheme.

After denying the technician and his scheme the authority to organize the field of observation for the sociologist, the question of how they, nevertheless, organize it in some other sense is open for investigation.

If one suspends the presumptive notion that a rational organizational scheme is a normative idealization with a simple import, i.e. demanding literally what it says it demands; and if one views a rational organizational scheme without information about what it is ostensibly meant to be, then it emerges as a *generalized formula to which all sorts of problems can be brought for solution*. In this sense there is no telling what determinations a formal organizational scheme contains prior to the time that questions are actually and seriously addressed to it.

More important than the open capacity and applicability of the formula is, however, the fact that *problems referred to the scheme for solution acquire through this reference a distinctive meaning that they should not otherwise have*. Thus the formal organizational designs are schemes of interpretation that competent and entitled users can invoke in yet unknown ways whenever it suits their purposes. The varieties of ways in which the scheme can be invoked for information, direction, justification, and so on, without incurring the risk of sanction, constitute the scheme's methodical use. In the following we propose to discuss some examples of possible variations in the methodical use of organizational rationalities.

Examples of variation in the methodical use of the concept of organization

The gambit of compliance[6]

As we have noted earlier, the concept of rational organization is often regarded by sociologists and management technicians as a normative idealization. Even though one finds only '*is*' and '*is not*' in the substantive determination, there attaches the sense of '*ought*' to the entire scheme.

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[6] We would like to point out that this example corresponds to what Selznick (1948, p. 32) suggests when he urges the study of the 'manipulation of the formal processes and structures in terms of informal goals'.

Conceived as a rule of conduct, the concept of organization is defined as having some determining power over action that takes place under the scope of its jurisdiction. This power to produce an intended result is uncertain and depends for its effectiveness on complex structural conditions. Hence, research informed by the conception of organization as a rule of conduct will seek to procure estimates of its effectiveness, and will relate the findings to factors that favor or mitigate against compliance. All such research is necessarily based on the assumption that the relationship of correspondence between the rule and the behaviors that are related to it is clear. A cursory consideration of the significance of rules as social facts reveals, however, that their meaning is not exhausted by their prospective sense. Aside from determining the *occurrence* of certain responses under suitable conditions, rules are also invoked to clarify the *meaning* of actions retrospectively. For example, one knows what a driver of an automobile signaling intent to make a left turn is doing in the middle of an intersection because one knows the rule governing such procedures. Indeed, it is a readily demonstrable fact that a good deal of the sense we make of the things happening in our presence depends on our ability to *assign them* to the phenomenal sphere of influence of some rule. Not only do we do this but we count on this happening. That this is so is richly documented in the work of Goffman who has shown how persons conduct themselves in such a way as to enable observers to relate performances to some normative expectation.

When we consider the set of highly schematic rules subsumed under the concept of rational organization, we can readily see an open realm of free play for relating an infinite variety of performances to rules as responses to these rules. In this field of games of representation and interpretation, the rule may have the significance of informing the competent person about the proper occasion and form for doing things that could probably never be divined from considering the rule in its verbal form. Extending to the rule the respect of compliance, while finding in the rule the means for doing whatever need be done, is the gambit that characterizes organizational acumen.

We propose that we must proceed from the theoretical clarification of the essential limitation of formal rules achieved by Selznick to the investigation of the limits of maneuverability within them, to the study of the skill and craftsmanship involved in their use, and to a reconsideration of the meaning of strict obedience in the context of varied and ambiguous representations of it. This recommendation is, however, not in the interest of accumulating more materials documenting the discrepancy between the lexical meaning of the rule and events occurring under its jurisdiction, but in order to attain a grasp of the meaning of the rules as common-sense constructs from the perspective of those persons who promulgate and live with them.

The concept of formal organization as a model of stylistic unity

It is often noted that the formal organization meets exigencies arising out of the complexity and large scope of an enterprise. The rationally conceived form orders affiliations between persons and performances that are too remote for contingent arrangement, by linking them into coherent maps or schedules. The integration transcends what might result from negotiated agreements between contiguous elements, and lends to elements that are not within the sphere of one another's manipulative influence the character of a concerted action. As a consequence of this, however, each link derives its meaning not so much from the specific rule that determines it, but from the entire order of which the rule itself is a part. Each link is intrinsically a member of a chain or fabric of links which conducts a reproducible theme. In this context, many specific instances or elements can be compared with each other as variations of a single pattern. For example, a simple polarization of authority pervades the whole order of an organization and can be found as a redundant thematic focus in many segments of it. A rational principle of justice may prevail in the entire structure while governing differentially correct associations between particular performances and rewards. The varieties of demeanors that are appropriate to a particular status within the system may be perceived as variations of a more general pattern.

We are suggesting the possibility of a principle of discipline that derives from the formal style of the rational scheme and which works against centrifugal tendencies and heterogeneity. The resulting coherence will be in evidence as outwardly proper conduct and appearance. One would then ask how the sensibility of esthetic appreciation is summoned for direction, information and control in various concrete situations. The dominant consideration underlying this construction would not be found in the field of means-end relations but in an all-pervading sense of piety (i.e. in accordance with Burke's definition of the term, a sure-footed conviction of 'what properly goes with what') (Burke, 1954, pp. 74 ff.).

The question whether the syntactic composition of the formal scheme is the leading metaphor for the interpretation of the composition of actual performances and relations is obviously difficult to investigate. A tentative approach may be in the investigation of ties and performances that appeal to bureaucrats as incongruous or in bad taste, and the study of those observed proprieties and tolerated licenses that are restricted to 'on the job' circumstances. In further development the problem could lead to experimental studies. For example, the features of the stylistically normal could be studied by having subjects perform tasks that are not related or even contrary to their routine activities. The subjects would be induced to perform these tasks under the gaze of their work associates, and would be penalized for attracting attention and rewarded for remaining unnoticed.

The concept of organization as corroborative reference

There is another problem which is related to the problem of stylistic unity. A large-scale and complex organization is often composed of fragmented tasks and relations that are not capable of acquiring a phenomenal identity of their own or, at least, it is thought to be extremely difficult to value them for their intrinsic merits. Whether it is enough to relate these tasks to work obligation, and whether work requires any corroboration of worth beyond pointing to its market price is an open question. If it does, however, the formal scheme could be invoked to attest to it.

When from the perspective of a fragmentary involvement the actual contingent outcome of one's work cannot be appraised, or appears senseless, then it can be understood and judged in terms of its overall functional significance by invoking the formal scheme. For example, mismanagement and waste could be defined as merely accidental or perhaps even justified, relative to the total economy of the enterprise. This consideration of the formal scheme not only persuades the participants of some correct or corrected value of their duties, but can also be used as a potent resource for enforcing prohibitions when interest dictates that such prohibitions should be justified.

In this construction, the formal scheme is used as a resource for bringing anything that happens within an organization under the criterion of success or failure when real results are not visible, or must be discredited. This is not a simple matter, of course, because the scheme does not promote a single ideal of economy but specifies a field of economy in which various aspects of an operation may compete for priority. For example, in an industrial enterprise certain ways of doing things may have one value relative to interest in production and an altogether different value relative to interest in maintenance. The problem that requires investigation is how various evaluations can be used as credits, and what sorts of credits have the consequence of assimilating some partial performance closer to the larger enterprise. The investigation of this problem would reveal the negotiable relationship between policy and politics.

Conclusion

We have cited the gambit of compliance, stylistic unity, and corroborative reference merely as examples of the possible methodical use of the concept of organization by competent users. The examples are based on reflections about ethnographic materials depicting life in large-scale and formally programmed organizations.[7] We have indicated earlier that such formulations must be regarded as preliminary at best. Whether what we have tentatively called the reference through the sensibility of esthetic appreciation exists effectively or not, is a matter to be decided by empirical research. Without doubt, these suggestions will have to be revised and amplified, but they must suffice to illustrate the ethnomethodological study of rational organization.

In conclusion, we should like to mention that there remains for this inquiry one more problem that we have mentioned in passing but have not discussed adequately. We have noted that the methodical use of the concept of organization must be studied by observing *competent* users. We mean, of course, socially recognized competence. Consequently it is not within the prerogative of the researcher to define competence. Instead, while he looks for the right way to use the rationalities subsumed under the concept of organization, he must also be looking for the rules governing the right to use the concept.

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[7] Some prominent examples of works containing excellent ethnographic descriptions of conduct in formal organizations are Barnard (1938), Dalton (1959), Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939) and Selznick (1949).

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Institutionalized organizations: formal structure as myth and ceremony

J.W. Meyer and B. Rowan

3

Formal organizations are generally understood to be systems of coordinated and controlled activities that arise when work is embedded in complex networks of technical relations and boundary-spanning exchanges. But in modern societies formal organizational structures arise in highly institutionalized contexts. Professions, policies, and programs are created along with the products and services that they are understood to produce rationally. This permits many new organizations to spring up and forces existing ones to incorporate new practices and procedures. That is, organizations are driven to incorporate the practices and procedures defined by prevailing rationalized concepts of organizational work and institutionalized in society. Organizations that do so increase their legitimacy and their survival prospects, independent of the immediate efficacy of the acquired practices and procedures.

Institutionalized products, services, techniques, policies, and programs function as powerful myths, and many organizations adopt them ceremonially. But conformity to institutionalized rules often conflicts sharply with efficiency criteria and, conversely, to coordinate and control activity in order to promote efficiency undermines an organization's ceremonial conformity and sacrifices its support and legitimacy. To maintain ceremonial conformity, organizations that reflect institutional rules tend to buffer their formal structures from the uncertainties of technical activities by becoming loosely coupled, building gaps between their formal structures and actual work activities.

This paper argues that the formal structures of many organizations in postindustrial society (Bell 1973) dramatically reflect the myths of their institutional environments instead of the demands of their work activities. The first part describes prevailing theories of the origins of formal structures and the main problem the theories confront. The second part discusses an alternative source of formal structures: myths embedded in the institutional environment. The third part develops the argument that organizations reflecting institutionalized environments maintain gaps between their formal structures and their ongoing work activities. The final part summarizes by discussing some research implications.

Throughout the paper, institutionalized rules are distinguished sharply from prevailing social behaviors. Institutionalized rules are classifications built into society as reciprocated typifications or interpretations (Berger and Luckmann 1967, p. 54). Such rules may be simply taken for granted or may be supported by public opinion or the force of law (Starbuck 1976).

Institutions inevitably involve normative obligations but often enter into social life primarily as facts which must be taken into account by actors. Institutionalization involves the processes by which social processes, obligations, or actualities come to take on a rulelike status in social thought and action. So, for example, the social status of doctor is a highly institutionalized rule (both normative and cognitive) for managing illness as well as a social role made up of particular behaviors, relations, and expectations. Research and development is an institutionalized category of organizational activity which has meaning and value in many sectors of society, as well as a collection of actual research and development activities. In a smaller way, a No Smoking sign is an institution with legal status and implications, as well as an attempt to regulate smoking behavior. It is fundamental to the argument of this paper that institutional rules may have effects on organizational structures and their implementation in actual technical work which are very different from the effects generated by the networks of social behavior and relationships which compose and surround a given organization.

PREVAILING THEORIES OF FORMAL STRUCTURE

A sharp distinction should be made between the formal structure of an organization and its actual day-to-day work activities. Formal structure is a blueprint for activities which includes, first of all, the table of organization: a listing of offices, departments, positions, and programs. These elements are linked by explicit goals and policies that make up a rational theory of how, and to what end, activities are to be fitted together. The essence of a modern bureaucratic organization lies in the rationalized and impersonal character of these structural elements and of the goals that link them.

One of the central problems in organization theory is to describe the conditions that give rise to rationalized formal structure. In conventional theories, rational formal structure is assumed to be the most effective way to coordinate and control the complex relational networks involved in modern technical or work activities (see Scott 1975 for a review). This assumption derives from Weber's (1930, 1946, 1947) discussions of the historical emergence of bureaucracies as consequences of economic markets and centralized states. Economic markets place a premium on rationality and coordination. As markets expand, the relational networks in a given domain become more complex and differentiated, and organizations in that domain must manage more internal and boundary-spanning interdependencies. Such factors as size (Blau 1970) and technology (Woodward 1965) increase the complexity of internal relations, and the division of labor among organizations increases boundary-spanning problems (Aiken and Hage 1968; Freeman 1973; Thompson 1967). Because the need for coordination increases under these conditions, and because formally coordinated work has competitive advantages, organizations with rationalized formal structures tend to develop.

The formation of centralized states and the penetration of societies by political centers also contribute to the rise and spread of formal organization. When the relational networks involved in economic exchange and political management become extremely complex, bureaucratic structures are thought to be the most effective and rational means to standardize and control subunits. Bureaucratic control is especially useful for expanding political centers, and standardization is often demanded by both centers and peripheral units (Bendix 1964, 1968). Political centers organize layers of offices that manage to extend conformity and to displace traditional activities throughout societies.

The problem. ***Prevailing theories assume that the coordination and control of activity are the critical dimensions on which formal organizations have succeeded in the modern world.*** This assumption is based on the view that organizations function according to their formal blueprints: coordination is routine, rules and procedures are followed, and actual activities conform to the prescriptions of formal structure. But much of the empirical research on organizations casts doubt on this assumption. An earlier generation of researchers concluded that there was a great gap between the formal and the informal organization (e.g., Dalton 1959; Downs 1967; Homans 1950). A related observation is that formal organizations are often loosely coupled (March and Olsen 1976; Weick 1976): structural elements are only loosely linked to each other and to activities, rules are often violated, decisions are often unimplemented, or if implemented have uncertain consequences, technologies are of problematic efficiency, and evaluation and inspection systems are subverted or rendered so vague as to provide little coordination.

Formal organizations are endemic in modern societies. There is need for an explanation of their rise that is partially free from the assumption that, in practice, formal structures actually coordinate and control work. Such an explanation should account for the elaboration of purposes, positions, policies, and procedural rules that characterizes formal organizations, but must do so without supposing that these structural features are implemented in routine work activity.

INSTITUTIONAL SOURCES OF FORMAL STRUCTURE

By focusing on the management of complex relational networks and the exercise of coordination and control, prevailing theories have neglected an alternative Weberian source of formal structure: the legitimacy of rationalized formal structures. In prevailing theories, legitimacy is a given: assertions about bureaucratization rest on the assumption of norms of rationality (Thompson 1967). When norms do play causal roles in theories of bureaucratization, it is because they are thought to be built into modern societies and personalities as very general values, which are thought to facilitate formal organization. But norms of rationality are not simply general values. They exist in much more specific and powerful ways in the rules, understandings, and meanings attached to institutionalized social structures. The causal importance of such institutions in the process of bureaucratization has been neglected.

Formal structures are not only creatures of their relational networks in the social organization. In modern societies, the elements of rationalized formal structure are deeply ingrained in, and reflect, widespread understandings of social reality. Many of the positions, policies, programs, and procedures of modern organizations are enforced by public opinion, by the views of important constituents, by knowledge legitimated through the educational system, by social prestige, by the laws, and by the definitions of negligence and prudence used by the courts. Such elements of formal structure are manifestations of powerful institutional rules which function as highly rationalized myths that are binding on particular organizations.

In modern societies, the myths generating formal organizational structure have two key properties. First, they are rationalized and impersonal prescriptions that identify various social purposes as technical ones and specify in a rulelike way the appropriate means to pursue these technical purposes rationally (Ellul 1964). Second, they are highly institutionalized and thus in some measure beyond the discretion of any individual participant or organization. They must, therefore, be taken for granted as legitimate, apart from evaluations of their impact on work outcomes.

Many elements of formal structure are highly institutionalized and function as myths. Examples include professions, programs, and technologies:

> Large numbers of rationalized professions emerge (Wilensky 1965; Bell 1973). These are occupations controlled, not only by direct inspection of work outcomes but also by social rules of licensing, certifying, and schooling. The occupations are rationalized, being understood to control impersonal techniques rather than moral mysteries. Further, they are highly institutionalized: the delegation of activities to the appropriate occupations is socially expected and often legally obligatory over and above any calculations of its efficiency.
>
> Many formalized organizational programs are also institutionalized in society. Ideologies define the functions appropriate to a business—such as sales, production, advertising, or accounting; to a university—such as instruction and research in history, engineering, and literature; and to a hospital—such as surgery, internal medicine, and obstetrics. Such classifications of organizational functions, and the specifications for conducting each function, are prefabricated formulae available for use by any given organization.
>
> Similarly, technologies are institutionalized and become myths binding on organizations. Technical procedures of production, accounting, personnel selection, or data processing become taken-for-granted means to accomplish organizational ends. Quite apart from their possible efficiency, such institutionalized techniques establish an organization as appropriate, rational, and modern. Their use displays responsibility and avoids claims of negligence.

The impact of such rationalized institutional elements on organizations and organizing situations is enormous. These rules define new organizing situations, redefine existing ones, and specify the means for coping rationally with each. They enable, and often require, participants to organize along prescribed lines. And they spread very rapidly in modern society as part of the rise of postindustrial society (Bell 1973). New and extant domains of activity are codified in institutionalized programs, professions, or techniques, and organizations incorporate the packaged codes. For example:

> The discipline of psychology creates a rationalized theory of personnel selection and certifies personnel professionals. Personnel departments and functionaries appear in all sorts of extant organizations, and new specialized personnel agencies also appear.
>
> As programs of research and development are created and professionals with expertise in these fields are trained and defined, organizations come under increasing pressure to incorporate R & D units.
>
> As the prerational profession of prostitution is rationalized along medical lines, bureaucratized organizations—sex-therapy clinics, massage parlors, and the like—spring up more easily.
>
> As the issues of safety and environmental pollution arise, and as relevant

> professions and programs become institutionalized in laws, union ideologies, and public opinion, organizations incorporate these programs and professions.

The growth of rationalized institutional structures in society makes formal organizations more common and more elaborate. Such institutions are myths which make formal organizations both easier to create and more necessary. After all, the building blocks for organizations come to be littered around the societal landscape; it takes only a little entrepreneurial energy to assemble them into a structure. And because these building blocks are considered proper, adequate, rational, and necessary, organizations must incorporate them to avoid illegitimacy. Thus, the myths built into rationalized institutional elements create the necessity, the opportunity, and the impulse to organize rationally, over and above pressures in this direction created by the need to manage proximate relational networks:

Proposition 1. *As rationalized institutional rules arise in given domains of work activity, formal organizations form and expand by incorporating these rules as structural elements.*

Two distinct ideas are implied here: (1*A*) As institutionalized myths define new domains of rationalized activity, formal organizations emerge in these domains. (1*B*) As rationalizing institutional myths arise in existing domains of activity, extant organizations expand their formal structures so as to become isomorphic with these new myths.

To understand the larger historical process it is useful to note that:

Proposition 2. *The more modernized the society, the more extended the rationalized institutional structure in given domains and the greater the number of domains containing rationalized institutions.*

Modern institutions, then, are thoroughly rationalized, and these rationalized elements act as myths giving rise to more formal organization. When propositions 1 and 2 are combined, two more specific ideas follow: (2*A*) Formal organizations are more likely to emerge in more modernized societies, even with the complexity of immediate relational networks held constant. (2*B*) Formal organizations in a given domain of activity are likely to have more elaborated structures in more modernized societies, even with the complexity of immediate relational networks held constant.

Combining the ideas above with prevailing organization theory, it becomes clear that modern societies are filled with rationalized bureaucracies for two reasons. First, as the prevailing theories have asserted, relational networks become increasingly complex as societies modernize. Second, modern societies are filled with institutional rules which function as myths depicting various formal structures as rational means to the attainment of desirable ends. Figure 1 summarizes these two lines of theory. Both lines suggest that the postindustrial society—the society dominated by rational organization even more than by the forces of production—arises both out of the complexity of the modern social organizational network and, more directly, as an ideological matter. Once institutionalized, rationality becomes a myth with explosive organizing potential, as both Ellul (1964) and Bell (1973)—though with rather different reactions—observe.

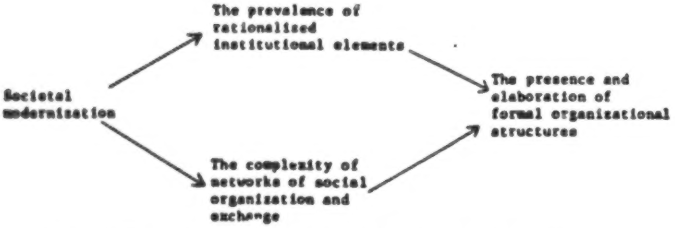
The prevalence of rationalized institutional elements
Societal modernization
The presence and elaboration of formal organizational structures
The complexity of networks of social organization and exchange

FIG. 1.—The origins and elaboration of formal organizational structures

The Relation of Organizations to Their Institutional Environments

The observation is not new that organizations are structured by phenomena in their environments and tend to become isomorphic with them. One explanation of such isomorphism is that formal organizations become matched with their environments by technical and exchange interdependencies. This line of reasoning can be seen in the works of Aiken and Hage (1968), Hawley (1968), and Thompson (1967). This explanation asserts that structural elements diffuse because environments create boundary-spanning exigencies for organizations, and that organizations which incorporate structural elements isomorphic with the environment are able to manage such interdependencies.

A second explanation for the parallelism between organizations and their environments—and the one emphasized here—is that organizations structurally reflect socially constructed reality (Berger and Luckmann 1967). This view is suggested in the work of Parsons (1956) and Udy (1970), who see organizations as greatly conditioned by their general institutional environments and therefore as institutions themselves in part. Emery and Trist (1965) also see organizations as responding directly to environmental structures and distinguish such effects sharply from those that occur through boundary-spanning exchanges. According to the institutional conception as developed here, organizations tend to disappear as distinct and bounded units. Quite beyond the environmental interrelations suggested in open-systems theories, institutional theories in their extreme forms define organizations as dramatic enactments of the rationalized myths pervading modern societies, rather than as units involved in exchange—no matter how complex—with their environments.

The two explanations of environmental isomorphism are not entirely inconsistent. Organizations both deal with their environments at their boundaries and imitate environmental elements in their structures. However, the two lines of explanation have very different implications for internal organizational processes, as will be argued below.

The Origins of Rational Institutional Myths

Bureaucratization is caused in part by the proliferation of rationalized myths in society, and this in turn involves the evolution of the whole modern institutional system. Although the latter topic is beyond the scope of this paper, three specific processes that generate rationalized myths of organizational structure can be noted.

The elaboration of complex relational networks.—As the relational networks in societies become dense and interconnected, increasing numbers of rationalized myths arise. Some of them are highly generalized: for example, the principles of universalism (Parsons 1971), contracts (Spencer 1897), restitution (Durkheim 1933), and expertise (Weber 1947) are generalized to diverse occupations, organizational programs, and organizational practices. Other myths describe specific structural elements. These myths may originate from narrow contexts and be applied in different ones. For example, in modern societies the relational contexts of business organizations in a single industry are roughly similar from place to place. Under these conditions a particularly effective practice, occupational specialty, or principle of coordination can be codified into mythlike form. The laws, the educational and credentialing systems, and public opinion then make it necessary or advantageous for organizations to incorporate the new structures.

The degree of collective organization of the environment.—The myths generated by particular organizational practices and diffused through relational networks have legitimacy based on the supposition that they are rationally effective. But many myths also have official legitimacy based on legal mandates. Societies that, through nation building and state formation, have developed rational-legal orders are especially prone to give collective (legal) authority to institutions which legitimate particular organizational structures. The rise of centralized states and integrated nations means that organized agents of society assume jurisdiction over large numbers of activity domains (Swanson 1971). Legislative and judicial authorities create and interpret legal mandates; administrative agencies—such as state and federal governments, port authorities, and school districts—establish rules of practice; and licenses and credentials become necessary in order to practice occupations. The stronger the rational-legal order, the greater the extent to which rationalized rules and procedures and personnel become institutional requirements. New formal organizations emerge and extant organizations acquire new structural elements.

Leadership efforts of local organizations.—The rise of the state and the expansion of collective jurisdiction are often thought to result in domesticated organizations (Carlson 1962) subject to high levels of goal displacement (Clark 1956; Selznick 1949; and Zald and Denton 1963). This view is misleading: organizations do often adapt to their institutional contexts, but they often play active roles in shaping those contexts (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975; Parsons 1956; Perrow 1970; Thompson 1967). Many organizations actively seek charters from collective authorities and manage to institutionalize their goals and structures in the rules of such authorities.

Efforts to mold institutional environments proceed along two dimensions. First, powerful organizations force their immediate relational networks to adapt to their structures and relations. For instance, automobile producers help create demands for particular kinds of roads, transportation systems, and fuels that make automobiles virtual necessities; competitive forms of transportation have to adapt to the existing relational context. But second, powerful organizations attempt to build their goals and procedures directly into society as institutional rules. Automobile producers, for instance, attempt to create the standards in public opinion defining desirable cars, to influence legal standards defining satisfactory cars, to affect judicial rules defining cars adequate enough to avoid manufacturer liability, and to force agents of the collectivity to purchase only their cars. Rivals must then compete both in social networks or markets and in contexts of institutional rules which are defined by extant organizations. In this fashion, given organizational forms perpetuate themselves by becoming institutionalized rules. For example:

> School administrators who create new curricula or training programs attempt to validate them as legitimate innovations in educational theory and governmental requirements. If they are successful, the new procedures can be perpetuated as authoritatively required or at least satisfactory.
>
> New departments within business enterprises, such as personnel, advertising, or research and development departments, attempt to professionalize by creating rules of practice and personnel certification that are enforced by the schools, prestige systems, and the laws.
>
> Organizations under attack in competitive environments—small farms, passenger railways, or Rolls Royce—attempt to establish themselves as central to the cultural traditions of their societies in order to receive official protection.

The Impact of Institutional Environments on Organizations

Isomorphism with environmental institutions has some crucial consequences for organizations: (*a*) they incorporate elements which are legitimated externally, rather than in terms of efficiency; (*b*) they employ external or ceremonial assessment criteria to define the value of structural elements; and (*c*) dependence on externally fixed institutions reduces turbulence and maintains stability. As a result, it is argued here, institutional isomorphism promotes the success and survival of organizations. Incorporating externally legitimated formal structures increases the commitment of internal participants and external constituents. And the use of external assessment criteria—that is, moving toward the status in society of a subunit rather than an independent system—can enable an organization to remain successful by social definition, buffering it from failure.

Changing formal structures.—By designing a formal structure that adheres to the prescriptions of myths in the institutional environment, an organization demonstrates that it is acting on collectively valued purposes in a proper and adequate manner (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975; Meyer and Rowan 1975). The incorporation of institutionalized elements provides an account (Scott and Lyman 1968) of its activities that protects the organization from having its conduct questioned. The organization becomes, in a word, legitimate, and it uses its legitimacy to strengthen its support and secure its survival.

From an institutional perspective, then, a most important aspect of isomorphism with environmental institutions is the evolution of organizational language. The labels of the organization chart as well as the vocabulary used to delineate organizational goals, procedures, and policies are analogous to the vocabularies of motive used to account for the activities of individuals (Blum and McHugh 1971; Mills 1940). Just as jealousy, anger, altruism, and love are myths that interpret and explain the actions of individuals, the myths of doctors, of accountants, or of the assembly line explain organizational activities. Thus, some can say that the engineers will solve a specific problem or that the secretaries will perform certain tasks, without knowing who these engineers or secretaries will be or exactly what they will do. Both the speaker and the listeners understand such statements to describe how certain responsibilities will be carried out.

Vocabularies of structure which are isomorphic with institutional rules provide prudent, rational, and legitimate accounts. Organizations described in legitimated vocabularies are assumed to be oriented to collectively defined, and often collectively mandated, ends. The myths of personnel services, for example, not only account for the rationality of employment practices but also indicate that personnel services are valuable to an organization. Employees, applicants, managers, trustees, and governmental agencies are predisposed to trust the hiring practices of organizations that follow legitimated procedures—such as equal opportunity programs, or personality testing—and they are more willing to participate in or to fund such organizations. On the other hand, organizations that omit environmentally legitimated elements of structure or create unique structures lack acceptable legitimated accounts of their activities. Such organizations are more vulnerable to claims that they are negligent, irrational, or unnecessary. Claims of this kind, whether made by internal participants, external constituents, or the government, can cause organizations to incur real costs. For example:

> With the rise of modern medical institutions, large organizations that do not arrange medical-care facilities for their workers come to be seen as negligent—by the workers, by management factions, by insurers, by courts which legally define negligence, and often by laws. The costs of illegitimacy in insurance premiums and legal liabilities are very real.
>
> Similarly, environmental safety institutions make it important for organizations to create formal safety rules, safety departments, and safety programs. No Smoking rules and signs, regardless of their enforcement, are necessary to avoid charges of negligence and to avoid the extreme of illegitimation: the closing of buildings by the state.
>
> The rise of professionalized economics makes it useful for organizations to incorporate groups of economists and econometric analyses. Though no one may read, understand, or believe them, econometric analyses help legitimate the organization's plans in the eyes of investors, customers (as with Defense Department contractors), and internal participants. Such analyses can also provide rational accountings after failures occur: managers whose plans have failed can demonstrate to investors, stockholders, and superiors that procedures were prudent and that decisions were made by rational means.

Thus, rationalized institutions create myths of formal structure which shape organizations. Failure to incorporate the proper elements of structure is negligent and irrational; the continued flow of support is threatened and internal dissidents are strengthened. At the same time, these myths present organizations with great opportunities for expansion. Affixing the right labels to activities can change them into valuable services and mobilize the commitments of internal participants and external constituents.

Adopting external assessment criteria.—In institutionally elaborated environments organizations also become sensitive to, and employ, external criteria of worth. Such criteria include, for instance, such ceremonial awards as the Nobel Prize, endorsements by important people, the standard prices of professionals and consultants, or the prestige of programs or personnel in external social circles. For example, the conventions of modern accounting attempt to assign value to particular components of organizations on the basis of their contribution—through the organization's production function—to the goods and services the organization produces. But for many units—service departments, administrative sectors, and others—it is utterly unclear what is being produced that has clear or definable value in terms of its contribution to the organizational product. In these situations, accountants employ shadow prices: they assume that given organizational units are necessary and calculate their value from their prices in the world outside the organization. Thus modern accounting creates ceremonial production functions and maps them onto economic production functions: organizations assign externally defined worth to advertising departments, safety departments, managers, econometricians, and occasionally even sociologists, whether or not these units contribute measurably to the production of outputs. Monetary prices, in postindustrial society, reflect hosts of ceremonial influences, as do economic measures of efficiency, profitability, or net worth (Hirsch 1975).

Ceremonial criteria of worth and ceremonially derived production functions are useful to organizations: they legitimate organizations with internal participants, stockholders, the public, and the state, as with the IRS or the SEC. They demonstrate socially the fitness of an organization. The incorporation of structures with high ceremonial value, such as those reflecting the latest expert thinking or those with the most prestige, makes the credit position of an organization more favorable. Loans, donations, or investments are more easily obtained. Finally, units within the organization use ceremonial assessments as accounts of their productive service to the organization. Their internal power rises with their performance on ceremonial measures (Salancik and Pfeffer 1974).

Stabilization.—The rise of an elaborate institutional environment stabilizes both external and internal organizational relationships. Centralized states, trade association, unions, professional associations, and coalitions among organizations standardize and stabilize (see the review by Starbuck 1976).

Market conditions, the characteristics of inputs and outputs, and technological procedures are brought under the jurisdiction of institutional meanings and controls. Stabilization also results as a given organization becomes part of the wider collective system. Support is guaranteed by agreements instead of depending entirely on performance. For example, apart from whether schools educate students, or hospitals cure patients, people and governmental agencies remain committed to these organizations, funding and using them almost automatically year after year.

Institutionally controlled environments buffer organizations from turbulence (Emery and Trist 1965; Terreberry 1968). Adaptations occur less rapidly as increased numbers of agreements are enacted. Collectively granted monopolies guarantee clienteles for organizations like schools, hospitals, or professional associations. The taken-for-granted (and legally regulated) quality of institutional rules makes dramatic instabilities in products, techniques, or policies unlikely. And legitimacy as accepted subunits of society protects organizations from immediate sanctions for variations in technical performance:

> Thus, American school districts (like other governmental units) have near monopolies and are very stable. They must conform to wider rules about

> proper classifications and credentials of teachers and students, and of topics of study. But they are protected by rules which make education as defined by these classifications compulsory. Alternative or private schools are possible, but must conform so closely to the required structures and classifications as to be able to generate little advantage.
>
> Some business organizations obtain very high levels of institutional stabilization. A large defense contractor may be paid for following agreed-on procedures, even if the product is ineffective. In the extreme, such organizations may be so successful as to survive bankruptcy intact—as Lockheed and Penn Central have done—by becoming partially components of the state. More commonly, such firms are guaranteed survival by state-regulated rates which secure profits regardless of costs, as with American public utility firms.
>
> Large automobile firms are a little less stabilized. They exist in an environment that contains enough structures to make automobiles, as conventionally defined, virtual necessities. But still, customers and governments can inspect each automobile and can evaluate and even legally discredit it. Legal action cannot as easily discredit a high school graduate.

Organizational success and survival.—Thus, organizational success depends on factors other than efficient coordination and control of productive activities. Independent of their productive efficiency, organizations which exist in highly elaborated institutional environments and succeed in becoming isomorphic with these environments gain the legitimacy and resources needed to survive. In part, this depends on environmental processes and on the capacity of given organizational leadership to mold these processes (Hirsch 1975). In part, it depends on the ability of given organizations to conform to, and become legitimated by, environmental institutions. In institutionally elaborated environments, sagacious conformity is required: leadership (in a university, a hospital, or a business) requires an understanding of changing fashions and governmental programs. But this kind of conformity—and the almost guaranteed survival which may accompany it—is possible only in an environment with a highly institutionalized structure. In such a context an organization can be locked into isomorphism, ceremonially reflecting the institutional environment in its structure, functionaries, and procedures. Thus, in addition to the conventionally defined sources of organizational success and survival, the following general assertion can be proposed:

Proposition 3. *Organizations that incorporate societally legitimated rationalized elements in their formal structures maximize their legitimacy and increase their resources and survival capabilities.*

This proposition asserts that the long run survival prospects of organizations increase as state structures elaborate and as organizations respond to institutionalized rules. In the United States, for instance, schools, hospitals, and welfare organizations show considerable ability to survive, precisely because they are matched with—and almost absorbed by—their institutional environments. In the same way, organizations fail when they deviate from the prescriptions of institutionalizing myths: quite apart from technical efficiency, organizations which innovate in important structural ways bear considerable costs in legitimacy.

Figure 2 summarizes the general argument of this section, alongside the established view that organizations succeed through efficiency.

INSTITUTIONALIZED STRUCTURES AND ORGANIZATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Rationalized formal structures arise in two contexts. First, the demands of local relational networks encourage the development of structures that coordinate and control activities. Such structures contribute to the efficiency of organizations and give them competitive advantages over less efficient competitors. Second, the interconnectedness of societal relations, the collective organization of society, and the leadership of organizational elites create a highly institutionalized context. In this context rationalized structures present an acceptable account of organizational activities, and organizations gain legitimacy, stability, and resources.

All organizations, to one degree or another, are embedded in both relational and institutionalized contexts and are therefore concerned both with coordinating and controlling their activities and with prudently accounting for them. Organizations in highly institutionalized environments face internal and boundary-spanning contingencies. Schools, for example, must transport students to and from school under some circumstances and must assign teachers, students, and topics to classrooms. On the other hand, organizations producing in markets that place great emphasis on efficiency build in units whose relation to production is obscure and whose efficiency is determined, not by a true production function, but by ceremonial definition.

Nevertheless, the survival of some organizations depends more on managing the demands of internal and boundary-spanning relations, while the survival of others depends more on the ceremonial demands of highly institutionalized environments. The discussion to follow shows that whether an organization's survival depends primarily on relational or on institutional demands determines the tightness of alignments between structures and activities.

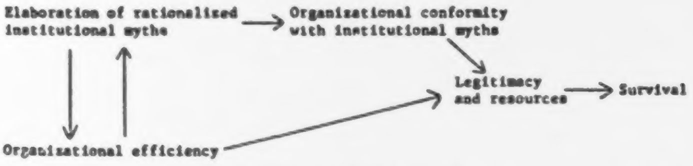
Elaboration of rationalized institutional myths
Organizational conformity with institutional myths
Legitimacy and resources
Survival
Organizational efficiency

FIG. 2.—Organizational survival

Types of Organizations

Institutionalized myths differ in the completeness with which they describe cause and effect relationships, and in the clarity with which they describe standards that should be used to evaluate outputs (Thompson 1967). Some organizations use routine, clearly defined technologies to produce outputs. When output can be easily evaluated a market often develops, and consumers gain considerable rights of inspection and control. In this context, efficiency often determines success. Organizations must face exigencies of close coordination with their relational networks, and they cope with these exigencies by organizing around immediate technical problems.

But the rise of collectively organized society and the increasing interconnectedness of social relations have eroded many market contexts.

Increasingly, such organizations as schools, R & D units, and governmental bureaucracies use variable, ambiguous technologies to produce outputs that are difficult to appraise, and other organizations with clearly defined technologies find themselves unable to adapt to environmental turbulence. The uncertainties of unpredictable technical contingencies or of adapting to environmental change cannot be resolved on the basis of efficiency. Internal participants and external constituents alike call for institutionalized rules that promote trust and confidence in outputs and buffer organizations from failure (Emery and Trist 1965).

Thus, one can conceive of a continuum along which organizations can be ordered. At one end are production organizations under strong output controls (Ouchi and McGuire 1975) whose success depends on the management of relational networks. At the other end are institutionalized organizations whose success depends on the confidence and stability achieved by isomorphism with institutional rules. For two reasons it is important not to assume that an organization's location on this continuum is based on the inherent technical properties of its output and therefore permanent. First, the technical properties of outputs are socially defined and do not exist in some concrete sense that allows them to be empirically discovered. Second, environments and organizations often redefine the nature of products, services, and technologies. Redefinition sometimes clarifies techniques or evaluative standards. But often organizations and environments redefine the nature of techniques and output so that ambiguity is introduced and rights of inspection and control are lowered. For example, American schools have evolved from producing rather specific training that was evaluated according to strict criteria of efficiency to producing ambiguously defined services that are evaluated according to criteria of certification (Callahan 1962; Tyack 1974; Meyer and Rowan 1975).

Structural Inconsistencies in Institutionalized Organizations

Two very general problems face an organization if its success depends primarily on isomorphism with institutionalized rules. First, technical activities and demands for efficiency create conflicts and inconsistencies in an institutionalized organization's efforts to conform to the ceremonial rules of production. Second, because these ceremonial rules are transmitted by myths that may arise from different parts of the environment, the rules may conflict with one another. These inconsistencies make a concern for efficiency and tight coordination and control problematic.

Formal structures that celebrate institutionalized myths differ from structures that act efficiently. Ceremonial activity is significant in relation to categorical rules, not in its concrete effects (Merton 1940; March and Simon 1958). A sick worker must be treated by a doctor using accepted medical procedures; whether the worker is treated effectively is less important. A bus company must service required routes whether or not there are many passengers. A university must maintain appropriate departments independently of the departments' enrollments. Activity, that is, has ritual significance: it maintains appearances and validates an organization.

Categorical rules conflict with the logic of efficiency. Organizations often face the dilemma that activities celebrating institutionalized rules, although they count as virtuous ceremonial expenditures, are pure costs from the point of view of efficiency. For example, hiring a Nobel Prize winner brings great ceremonial benefits to a university. The celebrated name can lead to research grants, brighter students, or reputational gains. But from the point of view of immediate outcomes, the expenditure lowers the instructional return per dollar expended and lowers the university's ability to solve immediate logistical problems. Also, expensive technologies, which bring prestige to hospitals and business firms, may be simply excessive costs from the point of view of immediate production. Similarly, highly professionalized consultants who bring external blessings on an organization are often difficult to justify in terms of improved productivity, yet may be very important in maintaining internal and external legitimacy.

Other conflicts between categorical rules and efficiency arise because institutional rules are couched at high levels of generalization (Durkheim 1933) whereas technical activities vary with specific, unstandardized, and possibly unique conditions. Because standardized ceremonial categories must confront technical variations and anomalies, the generalized rules of the institutional environment are often inappropriate to specific situations. A governmentally mandated curriculum may be inappropriate for the students at hand, a conventional medical treatment may make little sense given the characteristics of a patient, and federal safety inspectors may intolerably delay boundary-spanning exchanges.

Yet another source of conflict between categorical rules and efficiency is the inconsistency among institutionalized elements. Institutional environments are often pluralistic (Udy 1970), and societies promulgate sharply inconsistent myths. As a result, organizations in search of external support and stability incorporate all sorts of incompatible structural elements. Professions are incorporated although they make overlapping jurisdictional claims. Programs are adopted which contend with each other for authority over a given domain. For instance, if one inquires who decides what curricula will be taught in schools, any number of parties from the various governments down to individual teachers may say that they decide.

In institutionalized organizations, then, concern with the efficiency of day-to-day activities creates enormous uncertainties. Specific contexts highlight the inadequacies of the prescriptions of generalized myths, and inconsistent structural elements conflict over jurisdictional rights. Thus the organization must struggle to link the requirements of ceremonial elements to technical activities and to link inconsistent ceremonial elements to each other.

Resolving Inconsistencies

There are four partial solutions to these inconsistencies. First, an organization can resist ceremonial requirements. But an organization that neglects ceremonial requirements and portrays itself as efficient may be unsuccessful in documenting its efficiency. Also, rejecting ceremonial requirements neglects an important source of resources and stability. Second, an organization can maintain rigid conformity to institutionalized prescriptions by cutting off external relations. Although such isolation upholds ceremonial requirements, internal participants and external constituents may soon become disillusioned with their inability to manage boundary-spanning exchanges. Institutionalized organizations must not only conform to myths but must also maintain the appearance that the myths actually work. Third, an organization can cynically acknowledge that its structure is inconsistent with work requirements. But this strategy denies the validity of institutionalized myths and sabotages the legitimacy of the organization. Fourth, an organization can promise reform. People may picture the present as unworkable but the future as filled with promising reforms of both structure and activity. But by defining the organization's valid structure as lying in the future, this strategy makes the organization's current structure illegitimate.

Instead of relying on a partial solution, however, an organization can resolve conflicts between ceremonial rules and efficiency by employing two interrelated devices: decoupling and the logic of confidence.

Decoupling.—Ideally, organizations built around efficiency attempt to maintain close alignments between structures and activities. Conformity is enforced through inspection, output quality is continually monitored, the efficiency of various units is evaluated, and the various goals are unified and coordinated. But a policy of close alignment in institutionalized organizations merely makes public a record of inefficiency and inconsistency.

Institutionalized organizations protect their formal structures from evaluation on the basis of technical performance: inspection, evaluation, and control of activities are minimized, and coordination, interdependence, and mutual adjustments among structural units are handled informally.

Proposition 4. *Because attempts to control and coordinate activities in institutionalized organizations lead to conflicts and loss of legitimacy, elements of structure are decoupled from activities and from each other.*

Some well-known properties of organizations illustrate the decoupling process:

> Activities are performed beyond the purview of managers. In particular, organizations actively encourage professionalism, and activities are delegated to professionals.
>
> Goals are made ambiguous or vacuous, and categorical ends are substituted for technical ends. Hospitals treat, not cure, patients. Schools produce students, not learning. In fact, data on technical performance are eliminated or rendered invisible. Hospitals try to ignore information on cure rates, public services avoid data about effectiveness, and schools deemphasize measures of achievement.
>
> Integration is avoided, program implementation is neglected, and inspection and evaluation are ceremonialized.
>
> Human relations are made very important. The organization cannot formally coordinate activities because its formal rules, if applied, would generate inconsistencies. Therefore individuals are left to work out technical interdependencies informally. The ability to coordinate things in violation of the rules—that is, to get along with other people—is highly valued.

The advantages of decoupling are clear. The assumption that formal structures are really working is buffered from the inconsistencies and anomalies involved in technical activities. Also, because integration is avoided disputes and conflicts are minimized, and an organization can mobilize support from a broader range of external constituents.

Thus, decoupling enables organizations to maintain standardized, legitimating, formal structures while their activities vary in response to practical considerations. The organizations in an industry tend to be similar in formal structure—reflecting their common institutional origins—but may show much diversity in actual practice.

The logic of confidence and good faith.—Despite the lack of coordination and control, decoupled organizations are not anarchies. Day-to-day activities proceed in an orderly fashion. What legitimates institutionalized organizations, enabling them to appear useful in spite of the lack of technical validation, is the confidence and good faith of their internal participants and their external constituents.

Considerations of face characterize ceremonial management (Goffman 1967). Confidence in structural elements is maintained through three practices—avoidance, discretion, and overlooking (Goffman 1967, pp. 12–18). Avoidance and discretion are encouraged by decoupling autonomous subunits; overlooking anomalies is also quite common. Both internal participants and external constituents cooperate in these practices. Assuring that individual participants maintain face sustains confidence in the organization, and ultimately reinforces confidence in the myths that rationalize the organization's existence.

Delegation, professionalization, goal ambiguity, the elimination of output data, and maintenance of face are all mechanisms for absorbing uncertainty while preserving the formal structure of the organization (March and Simon 1958). They contribute to a general aura of confidence within and outside the organization. Although the literature on informal organization often treats these practices as mechanisms for the achievement of deviant and subgroup purposes (Downs 1967), such treatment ignores a critical feature of organization life: effectively absorbing uncertainty and maintaining confidence requires people to assume that everyone is acting in good faith. The assumption that things are as they seem, that employees and managers are performing their roles properly, allows an organization to perform its daily routines with a decoupled structure.

Decoupling and maintenance of face, in other words, are mechanisms that maintain the assumption that people are acting in good faith. Professionalization is not merely a way of avoiding inspection—it binds both supervisors and subordinates to act in good faith. So in a smaller way does strategic leniency (Blau 1956). And so do the public displays of morale and satisfaction which are characteristic of many organizations. Organizations employ a host of mechanisms to dramatize the ritual commitments which their participants make to basic structural elements. These mechanisms are especially common in organizations which strongly reflect their institutionalized environments.

Proposition 5. *The more an organization's structure is derived from institutionalized myths, the more it maintains elaborate displays of confidence, satisfaction, and good faith, internally and externally.*

The commitments built up by displays of morale and satisfaction are not simply vacuous affirmations of institutionalized myths. Participants not only commit themselves to supporting an organization's ceremonial facade but also commit themselves to making things work out backstage. The committed participants engage in informal coordination that, although often formally inappropriate, keeps technical activities running smoothly and avoids public embarrassments. In this sense the confidence and good faith generated by ceremonial action is in no way fraudulent. It may even be the most reasonable way to get participants to make their best efforts in situations that are made problematic by institutionalized myths that are at odds with immediate technical demands.

Ceremonial inspection and evaluation.—All organizations, even those maintaining high levels of confidence and good faith, are in environments that have institutionalized the rationalized rituals of inspection and evaluation. And inspection and evaluation can uncover events and deviations that undermine legitimacy. So institutionalized organizations minimize and ceremonialize inspection and evaluation.

In institutionalized organizations, in fact, evaluation accompanies and produces illegitimacy. The interest in evaluation research by the American federal government, for instance, is partly intended to undercut the state, local, and private authorities which have managed social services in the United States. The federal authorities, of course, have usually not evaluated those programs which are completely under federal jurisdiction; they have only evaluated those over which federal controls are incomplete. Similarly, state governments have often insisted on evaluating the special fundings they create in welfare and education but ordinarily do not evaluate the programs which they fund in a routine way.

Evaluation and inspection are public assertions of societal control which violate the assumption that everyone is acting with competence and in good faith. Violating this assumption lowers morale and confidence. Thus, evaluation and inspection undermine the ceremonial aspects of organizations.

Proposition 6. *Institutionalized organizations seek to minimize inspection and evaluation by both internal managers and external constituents.*

Decoupling and the avoidance of inspection and evaluation are not merely devices used by the organization. External constituents, too, avoid inspecting and controlling institutionalized organizations (Meyer and Rowan 1975). Accrediting agencies, boards of trustees, government agencies, and individuals accept ceremonially at face value the credentials, ambiguous goals, and categorical evaluations that are characteristic of ceremonial organizations. In elaborate institutional environments these external constituents are themselves likely to be corporately organized agents of society. Maintaining categorical relationships with their organizational subunits is more stable and more certain than is relying on inspection and control.

Figure 3 summarizes the main arguments of this section of our discussion.

SUMMARY AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Organizational structures are created and made more elaborate with the rise of institutionalized myths, and, in highly institutionalized contexts, organizational action must support these myths. But an organization must also attend to practical activity. The two requirements are at odds. A stable solution is to maintain the organization in a loosely coupled state.

No position is taken here on the overall social effectiveness of isomorphic and loosely coupled organizations. To some extent such structures buffer activity from efficiency criteria and produce ineffectiveness. On the other hand, by binding participants to act in good faith, and to adhere to the larger rationalities of the wider structure, they may maximize long-run effectiveness. It should not be assumed that the creation of microscopic rationalities in the daily activity of workers effects social ends more efficiently than commitment to larger institutional claims and purposes.

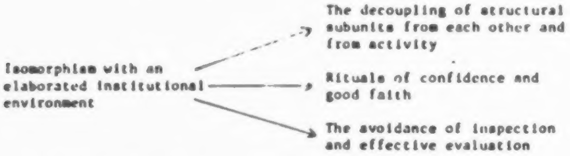
Isomorphism with an elaborated institutional environment
The decoupling of structural subunits from each other and from activity
Rituals of confidence and good faith
The avoidance of inspection and effective evaluation

FIG. 3.--The effects of institutional isomorphism on organizations

Research Implications

The argument presented here generates several major theses that have clear research implications.

1. Environments and environmental domains which have institutionalized a greater number of rational myths generate more formal organization. This thesis leads to the research hypothesis that formal organizations rise and become more complex as a result of the rise of the elaborated state and other institutions for collective action. This hypothesis should hold true even when economic and technical development are held constant. Studies could trace the diffusion to formal organizations of specific institutions: professions, clearly labeled programs, and the like. For instance, the effects of the rise of theories and professions of personnel selection on the creation of personnel departments in organizations could be studied. Other studies could follow the diffusion of sales departments or research and development departments. Organizations should be found to adapt to such environmental changes, even if no evidence of their effectiveness exists.

Experimentally, one could study the impact on the decisions of organizational managers, in planning or altering organizational structures, of hypothetical variations in environmental institutionalization. Do managers plan differently if they are informed about the existence of established occupations or programmatic institutions in their environments? Do they plan differently if they are designing organizations for more or less institutionally elaborated environments?

2. Organizations which incorporate institutionalized myths are more legitimate, successful, and likely to survive. Here, research should compare similar organizations in different contexts. For instance, the presence of personnel departments or research and development units should predict success in environments in which they are widely institutionalized. Organizations which have structural elements not institutionalized in their environments should be more likely to fail, as such unauthorized complexity must be justified by claims of efficiency and effectiveness.

More generally, organizations whose claims to support are based on evaluations should be less likely to survive than those which are more highly institutionalized. An implication of this argument is that organizations existing in a highly institutionalized environment are generally more likely to survive.

Experimentally, one could study the size of the loans banks would be willing to provide organizations which vary only in (1) the degree of environmental institutionalization, and (2) the degree to which the organization structurally incorporates environmental institutions. Are banks willing to lend more money to firms whose plans are accompanied by econometric projections? And is this tendency greater in societies in which such projections are more widely institutionalized?

3. Organizational control efforts, especially in highly institutionalized contexts, are devoted to ritual conformity, both internally and externally. Such organizations, that is, decouple structure from activity and structures from each other. The idea here is that the more highly institutionalized the environment, the more time and energy organizational elites devote to managing their organization's public image and status and the less they devote to coordination and to managing particular boundary-spanning relationships. Further, the argument is that in such contexts managers devote more time to articulating internal structures and relationships at an abstract or ritual level, in contrast to managing particular relationships among activities and interdependencies.

Experimentally, the time and energy allocations proposed by managers presented with differently described environments could be studied. Do managers, presented with the description of an elaborately institutionalized environment, propose to spend more energy maintaining ritual isomorphism and less on monitoring internal conformity? Do they tend to become inattentive to evaluation? Do they elaborate doctrines of professionalism and good faith?

The arguments here, in other words, suggest both comparative and experimental studies examining the effects on organizational structure and coordination of variations in the institutional structure of the wider environment. Variations in organizational structure among societies, and within any society across time, are central to this conception of the problem.

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Organizations: a dialectical view

J.K. Benson

4

The study of complex organizations has been guided by a succession of rational and functional theories and by positivist methodology. These efforts have proceeded on the basis of an uncritical acceptance of the conceptions of organizational structure shared by participants. The distinctions between divisions, departments, occupations, levels, recruitment and reward strategies, and so forth, through which participants arrange their activities have become scientific categories. Likewise, the participants' explanations for the structure of the organization have been formalized as scientific theories.

As a result of these tendencies the sociology of organizations has failed to develop a critical posture. The theoretical constructs of the field are tied to and tend to affirm the present realities in organizations. Radical transformations of organizations would undermine the corresponding theories.

The basic problem may be seen clearly considering two divergent assessments of the future of organizational life in industrial societies. Howton (1969) envisioned the extension of the core processes of rationalization and functionalization to whole societies; thus, in his view the society would become a large organization with carefully articulated parts contributing to overall objectives. Such a development would permit the continued relevance of rational functional theories of organizations, indeed would extend the range of those theories. Yet, the process through which this new organizational society emerges would remain outside rational-functional theories, although these theories may describe adequately the operation of such a society.

Simpson (1972) provided an opposing assessment of the future which raises the same theoretical problem. He suggested the possibility of the demise of rationality in organizations and a resurgence of emotional and moralistic bases of decision. The demise of organizational rationality would also spell the end of theories tied to it. As with the Howton example, the process giving rise to and/or undermining the realities to which the theories refer remains outside the theories. Dialectical analysis provides a way of reaching beyond these limits.

Dialectical theory, because it is essentially a processual perspective, focuses on the dimension currently missing in much organizational thought. It offers an explanation of the processes involved in the production, the reproduction, and the destruction of particular organizational forms. It opens analysis to the processes through which actors carve out and stabilize a sphere of rationality and those through which such rationalized spheres dissolve. Thus, dialectical theory can explain the empirical grounding of conventional organization theories because it deals with the social processes which conventional theories ignore.[2]

This article draws upon a general Marxist perspective on social life to develop a dialectical view of organizational theory. This approach to organizational studies has few close parallels. (For related efforts see Heydebrand, 1977, Goldman and Van Houten, 1977.) Marxists have rarely been interested in organizational analysis except to criticize the entire field; and organization scientists, for their part, have made minimal use of Marxist thought.

The dialectical view challenges the theoretical and methodological orthodoxies currently prevalent in the field. The established approaches, although varying in details, share a structure of reasoning or problematic which has been characterized as the "rational selection model" (Benson, 1971), the "goal paradigm" (Georgiou, 1973), and the "tool view" (Perrow, 1972). According to this problematic, much of what occurs in the organization is understood as a result of goal pursuit and/or need fulfillment. This view has been coupled with a methodological stance which accepts the conventionally understood components of the organization as scientific categories. The combination has uncritically accepted existing organizational arrangements and adapted itself to the interests of administrative elites. As a consequence organizational analysis has been dominated by issues of administrative concern. Its primary research questions have been administrative issues one step removed.

Despite this, all existing work will not be categorically rejected. Even work thoroughly within the conventional mode may be valuable. More important, a substantial amount of prior work has remained partially free of the dominant model—focusing on such phenomena as alternative power structures, strategic contingencies, political economy, negotiated order, and co-optative mechanisms.

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[2] There have been a few efforts to develop dialectical analyses of organizational phenomena. Blau and Scott (1962: 222-253) for example devoted a chapter to ongoing processes through which dilemmas are confronted and partly resolved only to be confronted again in modified form. Also see Weinstein, Weinstein, and Blau (1972) and Lourenço and Glidewell (1975).

and may be usefully incorporated in a dialectical analysis. Thus, this article builds upon existing work while going beyond it at certain crucial points.

THE DIALECTIC AS SOCIAL PROCESS

The dialectical view is a general perspective on social life which can be extracted from the Marxist analysis of economic structure and its ramifications.[3] Marx's analysis of the capitalist economy is an application of the general perspective. The general perspective is, then, expressed through Marx's analyses of capitalism but not locked into the specific categories and arguments of that analysis. Rather, a more general perspective running through Marx's work may be discerned.[4]

A dialectical view is fundamentally committed to the concept of process. The social world is in a continuous state of becoming—social arrangements which seem fixed and permanent are temporary, arbitrary patterns and any observed social pattern are regarded as one among many possibilities. Theoretical attention is focused upon the transformation through which one set of arrangements gives way to another. Dialectical analysis involves a search for fundamental principles which account for the emergence and dissolution of specific social orders.

There are four principles of dialectical analysis—social construction/production, totality, contradiction, praxis. These constitute a perspective on the fundamental character of social life. A dialectical view of any particular field of study must be guided by an application of these principles.

Social Construction/Production

The transformation of the social world is rooted in fundamental characteristics of human social life. People are continually constructing the social world. Through their interactions with each other social patterns are gradually built and eventually a set of institutional arrangements is established. Through continued interactions the arrangements previously constructed are gradually modified or replaced.

The construction of social arrangements is not a wholly rational-purposeful process, although the Marxist vision is that someday it might be. Social arrangements are created from the basically concrete, mundane tasks confronting people in their everyday life. Relationships are formed, roles are constructed, institutions are built from the encounters and confrontations of people in their daily round of life. Their production of social structure is itself guided and constrained by the context.

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[3] In formulating a position I have been influenced most heavily by proponents of a dialectical Marxism, specifically Lukács (1971), Lefebvre (1968, 1971), Markovic (1974), Goldmann (1969), Birnbaum (1969, 1971), and Habermas (1970, 1971, 1973). In addition, I have drawn occasional insights from such structural Marxists as Althusser (1970; Althusser and Balibar, 1970) and Godelier (1972). Finally, there are a number of places where I have drawn upon phenomenological sociologies, especially Berger and Luckmann (1966). I have consciously tried to work within a dialectical Marxist problematic and to draw upon other perspectives selectively where they provide insights which may be assimilated to the dialectical position.

[4] My procedure is not one of relying upon dialectical laws of nature such as the transformation of quantity into quality, the interpenetration of opposites, and the like. The notion of dialectical laws located in nature and expressed both in society and in physical phenomena has been rightly criticized by Mills (1962: 129–130) and many others. Rather I have tried to utilize some general features of Marx's model and method of analysis, as did Mills [illegible]

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An important constraint is, of course, the existing social structure itself. People produce a social world which stands over them, constraining their actions. The production of social structure, then, occurs within a social structure. There are powerful forces which tend to occasion the reproduction of the existing social structure. These include, as prominent elements, the interests of particular groups of people and their power to defend their interests within an established order. Nevertheless, the efforts of people to transcend their present limits bring them eventually into conflict with the established arrangements and lead to social change. Sometimes the process is not planned and coherent, for example, where in reaching for higher levels of material productivity people go beyond the limits of present social arrangements. Sometimes, however, people may come to understand the limits of social structure and purposely rearrange it, a process termed "negation of the negation" (Markovic, 1974: 24).

Totality

Another important commitment of dialectical thought is that social phenomena should be studied relationally, that is, with attention to their multiple interconnections. Any particular structure is always seen as part of a larger, concrete whole rather than as an isolated, abstract phenomenon.

The basis for this claim lies in the concept of social construction/production itself. People produce social structure, and they do so within a social context. The produced social world always constitutes a context which influences the ongoing process of production. Components of the social structure then become intertwined in complex ways. Divisions between components are not clear-cut or clean. Analysis must deal with the complex interlocking through which components are built into each other. This involves a search for dominant forces or components without resort to a deterministic argument.

The linkages between components are not complete nor wholly coherent. Rather, the processes of social construction take place in unique, partially autonomous contexts. These varying contexts are not centrally controlled and regulated except in rare cases. Thus, dialectical analysis, while looking at wholes, stresses the partial autonomy of the components. The principle of totality, then, expresses a commitment to study social arrangements as complex, interrelated wholes with partially autonomous parts. Analysis pursues the major breaks or divisions of the social structure which occasion divergent, incompatible productions, and the relations of dominance between sectors or layers of the social structure.

Because social construction is an emergent, partially autonomous process, the realities accepted by participants at any particular time may be continually undermined by ongoing acts of social construction. Even powerful actors may be unable to maintain an orderly, rationalized system of social relations in the face of this ongoing process. The totality, conceived dialectically then, includes newly emerging social arrangements as well as those already in place.

Contradiction

Contradiction in the social order is a third principle of a Marxist dialectical view. The social order produced in the process of social construction contains contradictions, ruptures, inconsistencies, and incompatabilities in the fabric of social life. Radical breaks with the present order are possible because of *contradictions*. Some of these are necessary features of a particular order. For example, an integral part of capitalist social formations is that they are antithetical to the interests of labor, yet the functioning system maintains or reproduces this contradiction.

Other contradictions, by contrast, are system-destructive, that is, their presence undermines the system and destroys it. In classical Marxist analysis, the contradiction between the forces of production and economic relations is of this type. The advancement of the productive forces brings these into contradiction with the established system of economic relations. Economic systems pass from the scene as a consequence of this contradiction. (See Godelier, 1972.)

The ongoing process of social construction produces social formations. Once produced, these develop a seemingly autonomous, determinate structure. The structure may be studied and orderly relations between its components may be observed as if it were not a human product. Hence, conventional, theoretical approaches and positivistic methodologies may contribute to the description of these orderly patterns.

The dialectical approach differs from conventional strategies in treating these orderly patterns as created, produced arrangements with latent possibilities which can be transformed. The dialectical vision of the future is not one of continuous, predictable development through an extension or consolidation of the present order; rather, the future has many possibilities and the final determination depends upon human action or praxis (Markovic, 1974: 210).

Contradictions grow out of social production in two ways. First, there is in any social setting a contradiction between ongoing production and the previously established social formation. The production of new patterns must always go against these established interests.

Second, the production process is carried out in differentiated social contexts producing multiple and incompatible social forms. The contexts vary in regard to the conditions affecting and limiting the process of production. There is in most instances little coordination between the multiple contexts within which construction takes place. Attempts to tightly regulate the process through authoritative direction or ideological manipulation are only partly successful, whether in political empires or organizational regimes. At the societal level the production processes in separate institutional sectors are partially autonomous. Likewise, at the level of organizations, the multiple levels and divisions form differentiated contexts within which social production proceeds in a partially autonomous manner. As a result the fabric of social life is rent with contradictions growing out of the unevenness and disconnectedness of social production.

Social contradictions have important effects upon production. (1) They may occasion dislocations and crises which activate the search for alternative social arrangements; (2) they may combine in ways which facilitate or in ways which thwart social mobilization; (3) they may define the limits of change within a particular period or within a given system. Consciousness of these limits may permit the ultimate negation of the limits; but in the interim the contradictions may be quite constraining.

Praxis

The final principle is praxis or the free and creative reconstruction of social arrangements on the basis of a reasoned analysis of both the limits and the potentials of present social forms.

The commitment to praxis is both a description—that is, that people under some circumstances can become active agents reconstructing their own social relations and ultimately themselves on the basis of rational analysis—and an ethical commitment—that is, that social science should contribute to the process of reconstruction, to the liberation of human potential through the production of new social formations.

Dialectical analysis contributes to this process in part by dereifying established social patterns and structures—points out their arbitrary character, undermines their sense of inevitability, uncovers the contradictions and limits of the present order, and reveals the mechanisms of transformation.

An important dimension of such analysis is the critique of theories which affirm the present order or which deal only with minor adjustments or variations upon that order. From a dialectical perspective, the practice of social science is, like other human activities, a process of production imbedded in a social context. The social scientist uses the tools and raw materials at hand to construct realities.

The next section explores the implications of each of the general principles for the analysis of organizational phenomena. This involves the formulation of a conceptual apparatus and a methodology appropriate to the dialectical study of complex organizations.

THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF ORGANIZATIONAL REALITY

An organization as part of the social world is always in a state of becoming; it is not a fixed and determinate entity. Its major features—goals, structural arrangements, technology, informal relations, and so on—are the outcroppings of the process of social construction. The dialectical perspective focuses attention upon this process through which a specific organizational form has been produced, the mechanisms through which an established form is maintained (or reproduced), and its continuous reconstruction.

The organization is a product of past acts of social construction. As a product, it has some orderly, predictable relationships among its components at any particular point in time. These relationships may be studied scientifically and empirical generalizations may be framed to describe the order. In fact, this is the focus of much sociological research on organizations—for example, Perrow (1967), Woodward (1965; 1970), Zwerman (1970), and others found correlations between the technologies and the power structures of organizations. The demonstration of such relations, however, is not the end of inquiry but the beginning. Rather than treating such relationships as determinate, causal connections, for instance, arguing that technology determines social structure, the dialectician investigates the social process through which the orderly, predictable relations have been produced and reproduced.

There is a tendency in much organizational research to interpret observed correlations in terms of a hypothetical social process. For example, Blau and Schoenherr (1971) formulated some possible processes through which executives decide to increase organizational differentiation. Actual historical research tracing the sequence of events, however, has been rare. (See Chandler, 1962, for an exception.) The usual explanatory strategy, as with Blau and

Schoenherr, is to formulate a hypothetical sequence involving actors who make rational or functional decisions, for example, fitting structure to technology in order to achieve efficiency.

Dialectical explanations observe or reconstruct sequences on the basis of historical evidence. The alternatives conceived by actors are explored; the constraints upon their decisions discovered; and the power bases of various actors uncovered. Once a pattern of organizational life is discovered, the processes through which it is maintained and/or modified are studied. Thus, an orderly pattern is taken to be a crystallized but temporary outcome of the process of social construction whose emergence and maintenance demands explanation. Several principles of social construction may be ventured as tentative guidelines for such investigations.

Ideas and Actions

The consciousness of organizational participants is partially autonomous from the contextual situations in which they exist (Murphy, 1971). They are not in any simple sense captives of the roles, official purposes, or established procedures of the organization. The participants fill these "forms" with unique "content." Sometimes they may do so in an automatic, unreflective way; in other periods they may become very purposeful in trying to reach beyond the limits of their present situation, to reconstruct the organization in accord with alternative conceptions of its purposes, structures, technologies, and other features. Zald and McCarthy (1975) and Strauss and others (Strauss *et al.*, 1964; Bucher and Stelling, 1969, Bucher, 1970) have provided examples of this phenomenon.

Interests

The process of social construction proceeds through the mediation of interests in which the participants' perspectives are affected by the present structure of advantages and disadvantages built into the organization. This is not to say that a perfect correspondence between interests and ideas will prevail at all times--rather, over time the structure of interests will gradually influence the formation of ideas. In crisis periods, when thoroughgoing change is possible, participants may see their interests more clearly and conform their ideas and actions closely to them.

Power

The ideas which guide the construction of the organization depend upon the power of various participants, that is, their capacity to control the direction of events. Some parties are in dominant positions permitting the imposition and enforcement of their conceptions of reality. Others are in positions of relative weakness and must act in conformity with the definitions of others. (See Silverman, 1971, for a similar analysis.)

Power in the organization derives to some extent from the official authority structure. Those occupying positions of authority have power to establish and enforce a model. They can design the organization as an instrument in the service of specific purposes. They can articulate its parts, adjust its technology and motivate its participants with certain ends in view. Once the organization is stablized, they can use their power to maintain it as a rationally articulated structure by resisting interference from outside and opposing sources of resistance inside. (See Bendix, 1956, for a particularly valuable documentation of such processes.)

In most organization theories this state of affairs is assumed and is outside the area of inquiry. The organization is assumed to be an instrument designed for a purpose, and research focuses on the structural consequences flowing from that and on the technical adjustments necessary to enhance goal pursuit. The power base of the leadership is not examined; alternative systems based on different power bases are not considered. Perrow (1972) explicitly recognized that the organization is a tool in the hands of powerful actors; but he did not provide a framework for analyzing the struggle to control the tool. Rather, he asserted that organizational analysis should permit us to assess the effectiveness of organizational instruments for reaching specific objectives.

An examination of the power base of authority figures would generally extend beyond the boundaries of the organization itself and this is perhaps why most organization theorists have avoided the problem. The grounding of organizational authority in larger systems—interorganizational networks, political economic power blocs, legal systems, and the like—is important to the dialectical approach. Crises in the universities in the late 1960s and the ultimate reliance of university administrators upon military and police forces to maintain order have demonstrated the importance of such investigations.

The sources of power to resist and ultimately to overturn the official authority structure of organizations are also important foci of dialectical analysis. How are some groups better able than others to extract advantages and privileges from the organization? How are some groups better able than others to influence the major decisions affecting the direction of the organization? Analyses of control over uncertainty by Crozier (1964; 1972; 1973);

Pfeffer (1972; 1973; Pfeffer and Leblebici, 1973; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1974; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1974; Pfeffer, Salancik, and Leblebici, 1976) and Hickson (Hickson *et al.*, 1971; Hinings *et al.*, 1974) have provided important beginnings on such questions. Yet, these insightful analyses must be placed within a more encompassing framework with a critical-reflexive component, otherwise, this line of investigation breaks down easily into a technocratic effort to reduce irrational bases of resistance to authority. Also, analyses of "negotiated order" by Strauss, Bucher, and others (Strauss *et al.*, 1963; Bucher, 1970) may provide valuable elements of an explanation, even though their efforts are faulty in giving the impression that everything of importance is currently negotiable. (See Benson and Day 1976, for a critique.) Likewise, the arguments of Bell (1973), Galbraith (1967), and Touraine (1971) stressing the centrality of occupations to the core technology of the organization as a basis of power should be explored, being careful not to accept the deterministic, functional explanations implicit in some of these analyses (particularly those of Bell and Galbraith).

The mobilization of participants to pursue their interests and to reach out for alternative structural arrangements is also a significant component of a dialectical analysis of power. Occupational groups, racial groups, social classes, and others may envision alternatives and become actively committed to their achievement. Such mobilization of commitment and resources will greatly enhance their power in the organization. It is intriguing that mobilization has been given little thought in organizational theory despite its obvious significance in the labor movement. Although mobilization has been prominent in other fields such as collective behavior, race relations, and politics, it seems to lie outside the paradigm of organizational studies. A few observers with analytical roots in these other fields have analyzed mobilization in organizations (Gamson, 1975; Bachrach and Baratz, 1970), as have students of social movement organizations (Zald and Ash, 1966). These efforts, however, are clearly outside the mainstream of organizational studies.

THE ORGANIZATION AS A TOTALITY

In a dialectical analysis the organization must be studied as a whole with multiple, interpenetrating levels and sectors. This means conceptualizing the organization as a concrete total phenomenon and attending to the intricate ways in which its components are tied together. The conventional, taken-for-granted distinctions should be rejected as the boundaries of inquiry. For example, abstracting a "formal structure" from the flux of ongoing social life is an unacceptable move for the dialectician; for concrete social life consists of an intricate interplay between form and content, between structure and process, and the like. Similarly, abstracting a sphere of "rational action" from the daily round of events is an equally serious error. Organizational phenomena must be understood as wholes in all of their interpenetrating complexity.

The principle of totality also directs us to see the intricate ties of organizations to the larger society—not only to macrostructural features such as economic and political systems but also to the everyday activities of people. Again, the arbitrary but conventional boundaries between phenomena must be distrusted. The conventional separation between organization and environment must be critically examined. The essential continuity, the relational character of social life must itself be analyzed and not overlooked in a search for analytical boundaries and units of analysis. The processes through which such conventional boundaries are produced and sustained must be pursued. The interests and power relations on which the conventional boundaries rest must be examined.

The presently established approaches to organization theory, by contrast, rely upon abstraction. Their abstractions correspond closely to the conventional administrative view and function as an ideology justifying, rationalizing administrative actions as well as a normative model or goal of administrative actions. That the model corresponds to our experience and seems reasonable is an indicator of our indoctrination with the administrative perspective and of the success of administrators in constructing a world in this image.

The history of organization theory may be seen, in part, as a process in which a series of "nonrational factors" have been conjured up only to be subdued by the rationalizing core. Thus, in the 1930s human relations theory arose as a champion of the informal structure. The thrust of human relations theory, however, was to harness and control the informal in the interest of rationality. Later, the environment emerged as an important challenge in the work of Selznick (1949) and others. Yet through the years the trend has been toward extending the tentacles of rationalization to this sphere as well. Thus, recent theorists like March and Simon (1958), Lawrence and Lorsch (1967), and the school termed "neo-Weberians" by Perrow (1972) espouse a refined rationalism in which the sources of irrationality internal and external to the organization can be contained. This corresponds, incidentally, with an era of organizational monsters which Perrow (1972) warns control their environments and in which principles of rationalization and functionalization are being extended to wider spheres of social life (Howton, 1969).

Dialectical analysis is not to be restricted to the narrow, limited, conventional reality promulgated by administrators. Its focus is the total organization from which this limited segment has been wrenched. It analyzes the intricate ways in which the organization as a rationally articulated structure is linked to its unrationalized context; it explores and uncovers the social and political processes through which a segmental view becomes dominant and is enforced; and, it anticipates the emergence of new arrangements based on shifting power relations. Thus, the dialectical view takes the rationalized organization as an arbitrary model unevenly imposed upon events and insecure in its hold. The strategy for developing this kind of analysis here includes the recognition of two levels of organizational reality—morphology and substructure.

Organizational Morphology

Morphology refers to the officially enforced and conventionally accepted view of the organization. It refers to the organization as abstracted from its concrete, intricate relations with other aspects of social life. This is the administrators' vision of the organization, the form which they try to impose upon events. Since they are partly successful, the morphology may also be somewhat accurate as a description of organizations.

Four aspects of organizational reality at the level of morphological analysis must be distinguished.

1. **The paradigm commitments of an organization** —specifically, its commitments to a domain, a technology, and an ideology. These commitments provide, respectively, a definition of the objectives of the organization, a specific set of techniques for pursuing objectives, and a set of ideas interpreting and justifying the organization's activities.

2. **The officially recognized and legitimate structural arrangements of the organization**—specifically, the network of social roles and role sets in the organization. This includes characteristics such as differentiation, centralization, bureaucratization, and so on.

3. **The constitution of the organization**—specifically, the bases of participation and involvement in the organization. These concern the terms on which participation and compliance of individuals and groups are effected. (On organization "constitutions" see Zald, 1970a, 1970b.)

4. **The organization-environment linkages**—specifically, the patterning or structuring of relations with organizations and individuals external to the local organization.

One may, of course, construct organizational analysis on the correlated variability between morphological components like most organization theorists. Their efforts generally proceed by: (1) demonstrating an empirical regularity in organizations, such as a correlation between number of hierarchical levels and number of separate divisions, (2) establishing the types of organizations within which the relationship holds, and (3) inferring a rational or functional linkage between the correlated factors (for example, see Etzioni, 1961; Perrow, 1967; Blau and Schoenherr, 1971).

The research undertaken by Blau and associates (Blau, 1968, 1973; Blau, Heydebrand and Stauffer, 1966; Blau and Schoenherr, 1971) in the Comparative Organization Research Program exemplifies the pattern. The research relies upon summary indicators of structural patterns based on documents such as organization charts and on interview reports of structural patterns. From these data measures for structural features such as hierarchy, differentiation, and so forth are derived. These are correlated with each other and with other factors such as size and technology. The pattern of correlations is then explained as a result of a rational or functional arrangement of the organization's parts. The actual process of adjustment, the sequence of events producing the pattern has not been observed but has been inferred to be one of rational or functional adjustment. Thus, the entire explanatory effort remains within the confines of an abstracted organization ripped from its historical roots and societal context and innocent of its deeper-lying power struggles and negotiations. Thus, the research itself is drawn into the presuppositions of the order under study. The extra-rational processes—internal and external to the rationally conceived organization—remain out of focus, beyond the periphery of the investigators' vision. (See Turner, 1977, for a related critique.)

A dialectical analysis, by contrast, should attend to the underlying process which produced and sustained the observed regularities. The systematic relationships among parts of the organization's morphology must be explained by reference to a more fundamental substructure such as a power structure which generates changes within the morphology. This too involves finding an empirical base for organizational measurement, that is, continuously analyzing how the primary data sources such as organization charts are produced and sustained.[5]

This does not mean that morphological research is worthless. On the contrary, the description of regularities at this level is a necessary step in a dialectical analysis. These efforts must, however, be integrated in a larger explanatory program. Most important, morphological studies should not be allowed to define the parameters of the field and thereby limit its explanatory capacity.

Even appeals to rational or functional selection processes may have a continuing importance. One certainly cannot

[5] The substructure consists of the network of social relations through which the morphology is produced and reproduced. Here one encounters the bases of power, the dominance relations which establish and maintain the morphology of the organization. The orderly sequences of development, the predictable relations between components at the morphological level are grounded in and ultimately explained by this substructure.

argue a priori that such processes are of no consequence. Such processes, however, should not be invoked as final arbiters, as the ultimate basis of organizational analysis; rather, actual event sequences must be examined. When rational or functional processes appear to be operating, such processes must themselves be grounded, that is, one must inquire about the production process through which rational or functional selection criteria are established and maintained. This, of course, may lead us beyond the conventional boundaries of the organization to larger systems of dominance.

Organizational Substructure

The substructural network provides the basis for transformation of the organization's morphology. The substructure is in part a nonrationalized sphere of organizational action, a complex network of relations linking participants to each other and to the larger social world in a multiplicity of unregulated ways. Administrative rationalizers try and have been partly successful at containing or harnessing the energy flowing from these ties. Much of organizational analysis, of course, has been supportive of such rationalizing moves by élites. Because it is only partly rationalized, the substructure provides the social basis for a latent social system forming within the established order and threatening its hegemony. For example the cleavage between sexual or racial groups, where coterminous with administrative divisions, could provide a cutting edge for consciousness formation (Gordon, 1972; Crozier, 1964). On the basis of substructural linkages people may act to overthrow the established morphology.

The substructure includes linkages to the larger societal system. These include the bases of recruitment of organizational élites; the framework of interests in the larger society setting limits upon the operations of the organization; the power structure controlling the flow of resources into organizations and through interorganizational networks; the ties of the organization to social classes, racial groups, ethnic groups, sexual groups, and others in the society; the institutionalized dominance patterns of professions in their spheres of practice; and so on. Developments within the organization often appear to be intricately related to events occurring in the larger society. In many ways the organization is a part of these larger patterns. Yet, the prevailing analytical strategy is to abstract the organization from these relations and treat it as if it were autonomous or at least capable of channeling or filtering the environment through its input output orifices. (For exceptions see especially Zald, 1970a, 1970b; Warren, Rose, and Bergunder, 1974.) Dialectical analysis, by contrast, focuses attention upon the relations.

The substructure also includes bases of dominance that are intraorganizational. Included here are structures of control over strategic resources giving some departments, divisions, occupations, and so forth, advantages vis-à-vis others. The centrality of an occupation to the core technology of an organization or the capacity of some departments to control uncertainty affecting significantly the welfare of other departments might provide leverage for exercising power in the main reality defining arenas of the organization. These and other sources of power might be explored within a dialectical framework.

There is a large body of literature dealing with these issues that may be incorporated in a dialectical analysis. This includes the work of Crozier (1964, 1972, 1973), Hickson and others (Hickson *et al.*, 1971; Hinings *et al.*, 1974) on strategic contingencies, Pfeffer (1972, 1973; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1974; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1974; Pfeffer, Salancik, and Leblebici, 1976) and Aldrich (1972, 1976; Whetten and Aldrich, 1975) on resource dependence, and that of Zald and Wamsley (Zald, 1970a, 1970b; Wamsley and Zald, 1973) on political economy. While none of these works are cast within a dialectical framework, they grapple with the underlying, nonrationalized bases of control within the organization. There is a tendency within some of these efforts, especially those of Zald and Wamsley, to see these underlying power dependence relations as the foundation of organizational goals paradigmatic commitments, and authority structures.[6]

[6] Since some of my argument here has been anticipated in the work on strategic contingencies, resource dependencies, and political economy, it seems important to suggest the ways in which a dialectical perspective incorporates but goes beyond these earlier efforts. The major difference is that these contributions represent partial perspectives which can be incorporated in a variety of more encompassing arguments. The dialectical view is instead a more nearly complete explanatory framework into which the more limited theories may be drawn. Work on strategic contingencies, for example, has been framed at times within an overall functionalist framework by assuming that the organization will grant power to those segments most crucial to its work (see especially Hickson *et al.*, 1971). The recent work by Pfeffer and Aldrich on resource dependence has produced a set of testable propositions floating free of any larger analytical system. In fact, they (Aldrich and Pfeffer, 1976) have recently tried to integrate their work with an evolutionary model. Thus, both the theoretical and practical connections of this body of thought are indeterminate. Drawing it into a dialectical framework provides a more general set of principles to guide analysis. We are directed to the role of contradictions, to the larger totality, to the importance of praxis, reflexivity, and the like. Thus the tendency to fall into evolutionist, functionalist, or positivist stances is counteracted.

The work of Zald, Wamsley, and others within a political economy perspective presents a more difficult problem. Clearly, I have been heavily influenced by the political economy view; my previous work on interorganizational networks (Benson, 1975) takes a political economy stance. Further, the work of Zald (1970a, 1970b) and Wamsley and Zald (1973) constitute a very ambitious effort to grapple with the issues addressed in the present paper. Their work grounds goals, technologies, constitutions, and other features of the organization in more basic power relations. They are sensitive to the latent, unregulated social networks (termed substructure here) beneath the superficial realities addressed by most conventional theories. Overall, their work constitutes the closest parallel within the existing literature. Yet, they do not characterize their work as dialectical or Marxian. In part my effort is to establish a link suggesting how this important body of work may be incorporated in a dialectical view.

Beyond this, however, there are some important differences. The proponents of political economy, resource dependence, strategic contingencies, and the like remain committed to a basically positivist methodology. They have adopted an uncritical, unreflexive stance toward organizational realities. They fail to see or at least to grapple with the tentativeness, the arbitrariness of the phenomena they describe. They do not examine how these phenomena are produced. Instead they pursue the description and analysis of a particular kind of order—characterized by resource dependencies. Dialectical analysis must go beyond this to deal with the processes through which this kind of order is produced and maintained. Clearly the political economy model is historically and contextually limited. Its accuracy, predictive utility, and so on are contingent. This complication cannot be ignored by the dialectician.

As with other theories we must seek the connection between interests and theoretical orientations. In some instances work of this type has been funded extensively by government agencies with an apparent interest in smoothing interorganizational coordination, overcoming resistance to change and creating more flexible organizational apparatuses. Thus, we must pursue the possibility that such work formalizes a perspective and interest that are institutionally isolable and limited. These may involve a program of technocratic rationalization through planning for bargaining with, and incorporating organization.

ORGANIZATIONAL CONTRADICTIONS

The organizational totality, as conceived dialectically, is characterized by ruptures, breaks, and inconsistencies in the social fabric. To these we apply the general term "contradiction," while recognizing that such rifts may be of many different types. Many theorists see the organization as a reasonably coherent, integrated system, rationally articulated or functionally adjusted. This view, of course, is an abstraction. If one looks at the organization concretely and pays attention to its multiple levels and varied relations to the larger society, contradictions become an obvious and important feature of organizational life. (See Heydebrand, 1977.)

The Production of Contradictions

Social construction-production is not a rationally guided, centrally controlled process. Despite the efforts of administrations to contain and channel the process, some elements in the organization and outside of it remain beyond the reach of rationalization. Beyond this, the rationalization process produces structures which then resist further rationalization.

Some contradictions are generated within the organization—growing out of the divisions, reward structures, control structures, and other separation points in the organization. These define distinct, semi-autonomous spheres of social action, which are divergent contexts for social construction-production. The people occupying particular locations will tend to develop models of organizational structure based on their peculiar priorities and problems—from a specific occupational or departmental standpoint. Thus, across a range of sectoral divisions or levels the organization generates opposing models or images of organizational morphology. Beyond this, the subgroups created by sectoral divisions, levels, and the like may be sufficiently autonomous to implement their opposing models to some degree. In any case, a large, complex organization is likely at any given time to harbor a number of structural inconsistencies, for example, some departments organized along professional lines; others, more bureaucratized. Many sociologists have analyzed inconsistencies of this kind, but few have recognized their basis as being a fundamental social process.[7]

Beyond this, the ongoing process of social construction in all sectors of the organization will continually generate alternatives to the presently established morphology. This may occur at all stratified levels. Even authorities may frequently generate innovations which are contradictory to the established patterns. Increased use of computers for purposes of coordination and control, new budgeting procedures, and other innovations from above may stand in opposition to previously constructed arrangements. Thus, the organization as established constitutes a structure which may resist its own further development. This should not be seen as a mysterious occurrence, but as a result of the rooting of present arrangements in a concrete structure of advantages, interests, commitments, and the like. Contradictions may be generated also in the larger society and imposed upon the organization. An organization may be charged with multiple, contradictory functions, for instance, the prison's dual purposes of rehabilitation and protection. This may produce inconsistent moves within the organization yielding contradictory structures, competing interest groups, and occasional periods of crisis. Or, an organization may be made dependent upon support or cooperation from opposing sources. For example, a manpower program might be dependent both upon employers with a conservative ideology regarding work and militant advocacy groups with a radical ideology. The manpower agency may internalize the conflict by developing contradictory components to deal with those opposed publics (Schmidt and Kochan, 1976).

Some contradictions within the organization may directly reflect the fundamental features of the larger economic-political system. Management-labor conflict, for example, is a basic feature of capitalist societies which is reproduced by the workings of those societies. This conflict leads to the production of contradictory arrangements inside all of the work organizations in the society. This sets limits upon structural innovations, ideological formulations, morale levels, and other features within the organizations (Krupp, 1961).

The Structure of Contradictions

The organization is typically the scene of multiple contradictions. The ongoing processes of social construction internal and external to the organization produce a complex array of interrelated contradictions. The combinations are contingent upon the ways in which components of the organization and the society are engaged. Contradictions become overlaid in unique clusters or patterns depending upon the ways in which different groups become involved in their production. Every organization is, then, a unique case because of the contingencies affecting social construction-production.[8]

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[7] Benson (1973) for an analysis of bureaucratic professional conflict which elaborates this point.

Consider, as an example, the knitting together of authority level and racial status as bases of social construction. Where a racial minority is subordinate in the organization's authority structure, the resulting patterns of contradiction may be different from otherwise comparable situations lacking the overlay of race upon authority. Recent crises in some state prisons have reflected the overlay of race and authority. The largely black populations of the prisons have increasingly seen the organization as an instrument of white oppression. Black inmates have created structures based upon racial antagonism, used a racial ideology, and linked their cause to that of racial liberation in the larger society.

Contradictions may be combined in ways which exacerbate conflict or in ways which contain it. Some combinations may constitute what Althusser (1970) terms a "ruptural unity," that is, a combination that permits a drastic reorganization of the system. Other combinations may tend to fragment the organization in a series of overlapping, partially competitive interest groups.

Participants may try to reach their objectives by managing or manipulating the combinations of contradictions. It has been argued, for example, that corporate élites have purposely created secondary labor markets for minorities and women as a device for maintaining control over jobs and dividing the labor movement (Gordon, 1972). Of course, combinations produced for one purpose may later produce perverse outcomes. The coincidence of race and occupation produced heightened racial tensions in the 1960s.

The Production of Change

Contradictions feed into the social construction production process in several ways. (1) Contradictions provide a continuing source of tensions, conflicts, and the like which may, under some circumstances, shape consciousness and action to change the present order. (2) Contradictions set limits upon and establish possibilities for reconstruction at any given time. (3) Contradictions may produce crises which enhance possibilities for reconstruction. (4) Contradictions are important, finally, as defining limits of a system. Some contradictions may be crucial features of a particular organizational order. Other contradictions of lesser significance may be eroded without changing the fundamental character of the organization. The fundamental contradictions tend to be reproduced in the organization by its normal operation as a system and by its linkages to a larger network. These contradictions define limits which must be exceeded in order to transform an organization.

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[8] It is not possible in a programmatic statement of this kind to specify a catalogue of contradictions weighted according to their importance. This is because (1) the combinations of contradictions operating in a particular organization is a unique, contingent structure, and (2) the ongoing process of social production continuously generates new contradictions.

The most basic, generic contradiction is that between the constructed social world and the ongoing process of social construction. The reification of the organization as a determinate thing standing over against people is contradictory to the ongoing process of production. This contradiction is the essence of social and political alienation. As people become conscious of this contradiction and act to overcome it, they rationally reconstruct the present order and overcome its limitations. Thus, we arrive at praxis.

TOWARD ORGANIZATIONAL PRAXIS

Dialectical theory attends to the interplay between practical interests and scholarship. The study of organizations is seen as a product of social construction--that is, theories have been produced by particular groups of people acting within a limited context on the basis of their practical concerns. Theories, then, reflect the social context in which they were created and the practical concerns of their creators (not simply the authors but the larger group of people whose actions produced the theories). In turn, theories are inextricably involved in the construction of organizations. Theories guide actors in their efforts to understand and control the organization. Theories provide models to be implemented, illuminate problems to be solved, reveal controls to be exercised, and so on. There is, then, a dialectical relation between organizational arrangements and organizational theories. The use of theories as guidelines for administrative control and as programs for organizational revolutions should be the object of study. This involves a "reflexive" moment within dialectical analysis and parallels the kind of analysis proposed by Gouldner (1970), Friedrichs (1970), and others.

The Critique of Limited Perspectives

Many theories of organizations can be understood as formalized solutions of certain actors (usually administrators or other dominant figures) to the technical, practical problems posed by the organization's dialectical character. Such a theory formalizes a way of dealing with (controlling or adjusting to) the multilevel, contradictory complexity of the organization. Devices such as socializing, monitoring, rewarding, adjusting, structuring, and negotiating provide solutions to concrete problems encountered by participants. Theorists pull these devices together into coherent systems which then may be adopted within organizations, sometimes as a result of aggressive social movements. Such theories provide sets of procedures, movements, routines which may be employed to pursue an objective by cancelling, controlling, or capitalizing upon the contradictory complexity of organizational life.

From a dialectical perspective, then, specific theories are not in any simple sense to be set aside. Rather, they are to be superceded in a more encompassing framework. Human relations, structural-functional, decision, and open systems theories may each provide accurate predictive statements about some aspects of organizational structure and process within delimited time periods and institutional locations. The dialectician goes beyond such formulations to inquire into the relationships between organization theories and organizational realities—considering the "reality-defining" potential of a theory of administration, the linkage between administrator and theoretician, and the connection of social theories to social movements of various kinds. Such issues have been raised regarding human relations theories (see Carey, 1967; Krupp, 1961; Perrow, 1972; Mills, 1970) but, this type of critique must be broadened to include other theories as well. For example, open systems theories appear to be linked in time to the growing prominence in administrative circles of cybernation and its application to the organization structure and not merely to production technology. In this situation, the open systems theories have considerable intuitive appeal and have provided the intellectual foundation for a number of textbooks on management, industrial sociology, and complex organizations. Indeed, such theories may have some predictive power within this new institutional setting. However, it is important from dialectical perspective to recognize that open systems theories and theorists are deeply enmeshed in the social process creating the new administrative situation. The new administrative realities and the new administrative theories have emerged hand-in-hand. The theories and theorists are, then, part of the reality they describe. Their plausibility and predictive power may be derived from and circumscribed by this historically and institutionally delimited phenomenon. Furthermore, the entire "package" of events may be linked inextricably to larger and more fundamental processes of societal transformation such as the emergence of dominance patterns within which technology and science serve as legitimating ideologies (cf. Habermas, 1970; Karpik, 1972).

Similarly, theories of "negotiated order," which the author finds intuitively more appealing than open systems theory, must be subjected to the same mode of unrelenting critical examination. This perspective has been the creation of analysts working mainly in professional organizations (mostly medical settings). The perspective does seem intuitively to have a high degree of correspondence to events in those settings, particularly to the interactional patterns characterizing everyday life among professional staff members (Strauss *et al.*, 1963; Strauss *et al.*, 1964; Bucher and Stelling, 1969). Some questions that should be pursued about this perspective include the following: Is "negotiated order" a general theory of order or a theory of a specific kind of order existing within a narrowly delimited class of organizational settings? What issues are generally non-negotiable and thus ignored by or taken a defining boundaries by negotiated order theorists? Are the proponents of negotiated order theory engaged in dispensing its insights to practitioners in professional organizations? Do negotiated order theorists merely articulate and conceptualize the perspectives of insightful actors in the settings under study? (See Benson and Day, 1976.)

The task of the dialectician, then, is neither to reject these theories out of hand nor to accept their accuracy uncritically. Rather, it is to understand the connection between theory and reality by analyzing the social context.

The Construction of Alternatives

Dialectical analysis must go beyond reflexivity; it has an active as well as reflexive moment. It must be concerned with the active reconstruction of organizations. This reconstruction is aimed toward the realization of human potentialities by the removal of constraints, limitations upon praxis. This task involves both the critique of existing organizational forms and the search for alternatives. The search for alternatives is based on the view that the future is not necessarily a projection of the present order, rather, the future is full of possibilities and one of them has to be made. This is not an unrealistic or utopian task; rather, it must be tied to an empirically grounded understanding of limits and possibilities in the present.

The commitment to social reconstruction is toward the freeing of the process of social construction from blockages and limitations occasioned by dominance. The larger objective is the realization of a social situation in which people freely and collectively control the direction of change on the basis of a rational understanding of social process (Markovic, 1974; Habermas, 1971, 1973).

A dialectical analysis of organizations, then, should be concerned wtih conditions under which people may reconstruct organizations and establish social formations in which continuous reconstruction is possible. This provides guidance regarding the selection of research questions. Some important issues are the humanization of work processes, the development of systems of participation (self-management), the discovery of alternatives to bureaucracy, the removal of systems of dominance, the provision for the utilization of expert knowledge without creating technocratic élites, removing the resistance of organizations to more rational arrangements (for example, overcoming resistance to the development of rationally arranged systems of organization). These are, of course, difficult problems and the task is complicated by the possibility that contradictions will develop between them, for example, creating rational systems may undermine self-management. Thus, the prospect is for a continuous process of reconstruction.

CONCLUSION

Organizations constitute important instruments of domination in the advanced industrial societies. Any effort to change these societies must deal with the organizational dimension. Likewise, efforts to construct alternative social arrangements within or in the place of the present order must grapple with the problem of organization. (See Schurman, 1968, for an examination of the organizational problems posed in Communist China.)

Despite the central importance of organizations to thoroughgoing social reconstruction, the study of organizations has not developed a capacity to deal with fundamental change. Instead, established approaches tend to affirm present organizational realities and to deal with relatively minor adjustments within the present order.

This article has attempted to begin the process of constructing an emancipatory alternative approach by proposing a dialectical view of organizations committed to the centrality of process. Four basic principles of dialectical analysis—social production, totality, contradiction, and praxis—are developed and applied to organizational studies. The principles of dialectical analysis provide a guiding perspective for organizational studies grounded in a view of human social life. The principles do not constitute a developed substantive theory of organizations nor a conceptual framework to guide research. The dialectical view provides instead a critical-emancipatory stance toward organizational studies. Much work remains to be done in developing the implications of this perspective within substantively based theory and research.

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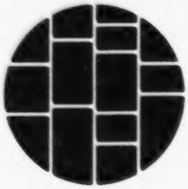

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